

THE NETTLE
AND THE
NIGHTMARES

ALORA BLACK

The Nettle & The Nightmare

A BOUND BY BLOOD NOVELLA

ALORA BLACK

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Trigger and Content Warnings

Warning

This novella contains explicit material and is meant only for those 18 and older.

Trigger Warnings

In general, this book contains mentions of blood, violence, death, mental health, trauma, and graphic sexual content.

Dedication

This book is for the dreamers that became warriors to protect the ones they love.

One

A ny veteran slayer would swear that to enter The Dreadwood Forest alone is to knock on death's door. So, when I made it to the edge of those dark and twisted trees, I hesitated. No one was left to witness the pause as I turned to take in the remains of the far off castle that had been my home.

Only the top spires were visible from the cursed copse of thorns that had arisen overnight. They strained toward the sky like begging hatchlings, pleading with our Sun God for mercy. They blurred and disappeared completely from view as I grieved. I added my cracking voice to theirs in one last prayer, dedicating my life to those I'd lost to the curse. I conjured the memories of when I'd first seen their prone bodies scattered about the grounds.

A look of unnatural tranquility froze Celia's usually mischievous face. It seemed like she had just fetched the tarnished silver tray from my room. She had been the first of my maids to speak to me, and soon became my partner in crime. She'd taught me the common card games, and how to win every time. We had used my first winnings to buy a set of breeches I could wear, rather than the skirts my mother forced on me. Despite her recent rejection of the stronger feelings I'd confessed, I still considered her my closest friend. I had packed a set of cards in Celia's honor, to remember not all battles are won by force.

The parents of my heart, Masters Jericho in red, Yinzu in blue, and Eliza in green, had been in the training yard. They lay ringed by the guards they trained; the curse altering their meditation into one of enchanted sleep. Jericho, Yinzu and Eliza had been my most constant companions and the strongest of us. All were masters of combat and strategy. I braided my bone-white hair with the silver thorns they'd crafted for me in honor of winning my title of Slayer Rose. Before leaving, I pricked my finger and shed three drops of blood in an additional oath to free them, once and for all.

I hadn't bothered to look in on The King and Queen, parents in name only after giving me to the masters to train and raise. They were most likely in their separate rooms, the picture of stately and solemn sleep. My mother was no doubt frozen while reading a scroll sealed by the church's sigil. My father dreaming up yet another alliance proposal to one of our lingering allies.

All had fallen, regardless of status and skill. Because of *her*.

I welcomed the warmth of rage, enjoyed the way it melted the last lingering chills of fear. I stoked the rage higher, letting it burn away the remnants of Princess Brenlyn. The girl that cared too much. I let it burn away anything and everything that wasn't Slayer Rose. I was cursed to be my people's sleeping beauty, but rather than hide, I'd trained to fight. Now that sleep evaded me, I would be their sleepless knight. I would free us all by destroying the twisted mistress who would curse a babe.

Steady hands did a last check of my weapons before pulling my cloak's hood low. The only thing

visible to the anguished woods were my red lips, now curled into a vicious grin.

No sooner than the Dreadwood's eternal night enveloped me did the vampires attack. Sharp fangs met my Starfire blade before their owner slid back and shrieked, their first taste of sun and pain in however long since they had been damned, trapping them in agony. The gray metal singed their cold flesh, filling the air with noxious gas as I parried attack after attack. I kept my senses open for the heated ruby glow of their ember eyes. My heart pumped wildly, a perfect trap for these newly turned. Soon they were nothing but a pile of ash around me. The poison of the star's fire burned them completely from the inside out.

I knelt, coating the blade in their ashes before sheathing it, a silent promise I would not rest till the last vampire was grit in my scabbard.

Walking further into the forest, I placed my fingers on my neck, using my pulse's beat to chant the names of my fallen.

Two

On the third day I recognized the slight shift of light that signaled nightfall. Subtle as it was, it was my only indicator of time passing this far into the woods. Soon I'd need to set up camp to take the sleepless meditation that kept my mind and body sharp. Despite the lack of sun, I would continue a little longer. I felt, invigorated and alive. I'd lost count of how many I'd killed, their ashes scattering as soon as they fell. With each successful encounter, I took heart that the years of training might be enough to slay the vampire mistress who held my people's lives in her claws. I slowed to take in my surroundings, listening intently for the warning scrape of footsteps or the frenzied flutter of bat wings. In the unnatural silence I reminded myself of Master Jericho's plan.

Originally meant for the entire Slayer party, a thousand strong, we'd clear her woods with a massive attack, draw her out, so I could finish her off with the Starfire blade. So far, I'd survived fighting alone, but I had no idea if she would take the bait and leave the keep. And how I needed her to leave her keep.

We knew nothing about it as none of our search parties ever returned. We only knew of the mistress because of the nefarious deeds she'd performed in our lands since the curse. A succubus of unparalleled beauty, night black hair and golden eyes. Unable to transform fully into a bat, she was dubbed a demi-shifter marked by the twisted horns and large bat-like wings that reflected the corrupt wood she called home. The Sun God's wrath soon followed those who fell to her guile, keeping our kingdom untainted by her influence.

All I originally needed to do was land enough hits to infect her with the sun's poison. Or, if possible, plunge the blade into her heart. Now that role was only possible if she'd take the bait. I would need to catch her unaware as well. I couldn't let the giddiness of my successes blind me to the monumental steps I still needed to take. The curse would end with her. And I was her end. I chanted that as I fell back into a watchful, wary walk.

An hour later, I had set up camp in view of a cave. Normally I'd check it for bears, but this forest was unnatural. Who knew what else could call it home? Unwilling to attempt clearing it alone, I kept it in sight as a last resort in case of a storm. I sat carefully between the roots of a large tree after lighting my small fire. Scooting backwards I swung my spiked braid forward to drape across my chest before leaning against the unnaturally smooth trunk. I kept my sword on my lap knowing despite having trained to match a vampire's speed, an ambushing attacker would not give me enough time to find my weapon before they would have torn out my throat. It was why I slayed without mercy. Questions were a death sentence.

I stared at the flames, wondering if I was imagining the faint green tinge to their flickering length. It wasn't long into my own musings about the peculiarities of this place that the forest came alive. The

branches above me creaked as they bent backwards to reveal the night sky. Spooked by the sound, I tried launching to my feet, only to stumble over newly exposed roots. The sword slipped from my lap as I took a few steps to regain my balance.

A rush of wind and shadow dropped from the sky, exterminating the flames. The moonlight illuminated a spear of darkness shooting from an unearthly void. Reaching for my blade, I felt my fingertips brush the smooth pommel before a murky tendril yanked my arms back and together. I fell to my knees.

Before I could right myself, my ankles and neck bore the shadows binds as well. What kind of cruel twist of fate was this? What sorcery could command both trees and shade? I writhed against the tightening shadows. I couldn't have failed already. I rejected that possibility completely. But as their grip held impossibly firm, I tried to keep my breathing even. Perhaps this was one of the Mistress's rivals. If I could convince them to let me go we could work together to bring her down. The buzzing in my head calmed at that. I could still defeat her.

All hope left me when a large pair of membranous wings emerged from the pitch, followed by the signature silhouette of long, twisted horns. It was her. When her molten gold eyes found my own, I ensured she'd find nothing but fire in the emerald depths. Would she recognize the eyes of the baby she'd cursed in spite? Would she spare me to play more games or kill me outright if she knew?

The void clothed her, collapsing into a backless gown that rippled as she stalked closer. I felt my heart stop, my very being going still as a doe in a field. Enraptured by the terrible beauty of the very beast I was destined to slay. Dismissing her wings and horns with a flick of her wrist, she knelt in front of me. The shadows tightened their grip, and I felt my balance wavering. I threw myself to the side to avoid impaling myself on the thorns woven in my hair. I cursed myself for not considering the possibility of a disguise. If she had any spies in our kingdom, there would be no denying my identity now.

Curiosity colored her gaze as she pinched the end of my braid between her shadow soaked fingers. The moonlit strands glinted against the contrast in my peripherals.

A line of pain cut across my cheekbone as my mortal enemy tested the thorn's sharpness against my own skin. I bared my teeth at her in unveiled hatred, refusing to make a sound at the pain. Her eyes stayed firmly on the cut, the gilded hue never wavering. She watched aptly as a drop of blood dripped down my cheek, admiring the tear like trail it left behind.

"Tell me, human. Who else travels with you?" Her sultry voice filled my ears like the sweetest music. I felt my hatred wavering, a strong desire to answer her every question. Sharpening my will, I held my tongue. The beginnings of a headache starting with an unexpected emotional turn. Where was my hatred?

A single dark brow lifted, her ruby-red mouth stretching into a smile that revealed her pure white fangs. She bent closer, those fangs scraping the sensitive skin above my cool shadow collar. All it would take was one bite, and I'd be dead. Unable to become a vampire without her blood in my system. She took a deep inhale and chuckled, the sound loosening my muscles without my permission.

"I'll ask again then, who else travels with you?" Her voice had tears springing to my eyes, but still I kept silent.

The shadows tightened around my neck until it became difficult to breathe.

"You can answer me here or I can take the answers from your mind. Now tell me or I shall lose my patience."

"I travel alone, Lady," I croaked.

"Mistress, I am no Lady, as I'm sure you know." She quipped, loosening the band around my

throat. Taking in my answer, she gripped the pommel I had been moments away from reaching. I held my breath, wondering if it would really be this easy. She lifted it easily, brows drawing in at the strange, darkened blade. She brushed a fingertip across it but rather than bursting into flames like her younger counterparts, she released a small hiss. The finger was hastily placed in her mouth before she looked back at me with a renewed understanding.

My heart dropped. Not only had I lost the element of surprise, but I'd also alerted her to the presence of the only possible weapon that could slay her.

"I had wondered how a little thing like you had slain thirty of my recruits, but then it seems you have quite a few tricks up your sleeve." That was the first time I'd ever been called small, but I supposed my usual height and build was lacking in comparison to hers. She broke the scabbard off my waist before sheathing the weapon, holding it to her waist. The gloom willingly threaded itself into a belt.

I'd lost. Lost my sword, my best chance of breaking the curse, my best chance at revenge, all because what? Some sentient shadows? Why hadn't the Sun God warned me of this power?

Her throat cleared, calling me from my tumultuous thoughts.

"Why slay them? Did they threaten you?" She asked slowly, calmly, the effects of her presence lessening as she strode away from me to observe the quiet trees.

"What reason does a Slayer need to slay vampires?" I spat as I rolled into a kneeling position. My full identity was more likely to condemn me than save me. This information might prevent her from asking for more. The only question was whether she'd kill me or recognize me and renew her curse.

"A Slayer? How interesting, I thought your kind extinct." She laughed, examining me again like the idea of my being a slayer was an amusing joke.

"Set me free and then we'll see who is laughing." I all but snarled. I'd not worked my entire life to shut up the taunting guards just to be mocked and defeated within seconds. Nor be mocked by some outright lie.

"You're not in much of a position to make demands, although if you'd like, I'd tutor you in the best uses of that particular one." Her amusement increased at my apparent discomfort.

The ground beneath my knees grew sharper as I shifted to see if I could stand. The shadows around my ankles grew tighter in response. How I hated her. The buzzing in my head lessened at the return of the familiar feeling.

"Why are you in my forest, little Slayer? Do you have a death wish?"

I spat at her feet rather than answer. She'd have to torture me if she wanted more answers.

She sighed, allowing a glove to vanish before wrapping her porcelain hand around my wrist.

Every thought vanished as my back bowed off the floor. Pain flowed through me like water and I gasped for air. No torture method or training could prepare me for the soul-deep scream that shook my being.

"Why are you in my forest, little Slayer?" Her words echoed through me until my own truths began bubbling to the surface. I bucked away from her touch, smashing my face into the hard ground.

"To kill you." I breathed, blood now dripping from my nose to fill my mouth before everything went dark.

Three

I woke, face pressed into hay that smelled of mildew and sulfur. Blinking wearily, I recognized the telltale grid of iron bars, the drip of water common in most dungeons... but there was that smell again. Metallic and repugnant. Blinking again, I saw the jagged outlines of rock reaching toward the cavernous ceiling. I was in a cave, was it the same one I'd seen before? A cold droplet hit my neck, and I reached up in confusion. Bare skin met my touch. My head unburdened by weaving of any kind. My braid... my signature braid was gone. Cut roughly at the base of my neck. I gripped the short strands in shock, tears prickling. It was gone, my most feminine trait. Really my only feminine trait. My hair had made me feel that I could be both strong and beautiful, and now unarmed and captured, I felt like I was neither.

It was nonsensical. I was willing to lose my life, had come here risking everything, but the loss of my hair had never occurred to me. One of the many oversights I'd certainly had, I wondered which of the many had landed me here as I looked at the bars. Would I have learned of the Mistress' shadow magic or pain touch if I'd spent more time in the library and less time sparring? Should I have spent more time with Master Yinzu in training my mind? Or should I have traveled to our neighboring kingdom to learn with the Nameless ones how to hide in plain sight? Instead I'd spent years training my body for speed, until I had become known for it. I was still required to work on my mind's defenses, but despite Yinzu's best efforts I had known it was never going to be my strength. I had never excelled in espionage or lying of any sort, and much preferred spending the day in combat with my fellow Slayers.

Keepers of the Dorn Kingdom, fallen by a single thoughtless kiss. I remembered Celia's look of shock, and recalled my dismay when I realized she'd never felt the same. I had quickly offered her enough to leave service. More than enough money to travel and leave it all behind, but she'd refused. She assured me she was not offended, instead promising we'd talk things through in the morning. Only that morning had never come. The curse triggered not by a prick of the finger, but one of the heart.

The cell grew darker, perhaps a result of my now spiraling anxiety.

Searching the cell for a weapon or rock of some sort, I came up empty. My heart rate continued to climb as I realized I had no way of knowing what plans she had for me now that I had admitted my own.

Returning to the pile of hay, I kicked it aside, hoping I would uncover something useful, instead I saw the unmistakable slate gray of ashes. It would seem this cell was not just for holding humans. But what reason would she have for killing vampires?

A shadow detached itself from the wall before expanding into a humanoid figure, its long arms nearly brushed the ground as it advanced. The only features on its face were a pair of glowing gold

eyes, eyes that looked remarkably like...

"So you woke after all." The Mistress' voice came from the shadow figure.

"I couldn't sleep for long, given the accommodations." I tried not to show my fear, adding nightmare creatures to the growing list of deficiencies in my daily training.

"Yes, well murder confessions hardly warranted a feather bed, I'm afraid." The creature crooned, resting its head in its overly large hands.

"Is starvation and shaving your usual method of retaliation, then?" I asked, my throat growing tighter with what I was going to label as thirst.

"I'm afraid I don't keep human food stocked without an RSVP, not to mention I'm a little shorthanded at the moment. As for the hair, well, I'm afraid there was no other way of disarming you and my guard got a little overzealous in the process. You've made a few enemies, it seems. Anything you find lacking, you can take up with the little murderous minx with a God complex."

I snorted despite myself. I hadn't thought about any of the consequences my failure to slay the mistress might bring beyond death. Of course at least one of the vampires slain would leave behind allies if not friends, and I'd slain dozens.

"I'm glad to see you have a sense of humor. It'll make the next part much easier."

"What next part?" I squeaked.

"This is your last chance to give me answers to my questions willingly. Do you accept?" Her voice came again, calmer. My heart raced, the calm tone reminding me of a snake in the grass, dangerous even in peace.

The thought of regular torture methods filled my mind. I knew I could withstand them all without issue, but the figure in front of me made my palms slick with fear. Still, I hadn't come this far to betray the vulnerable to their enemy.

"Never." I croaked.

The nightmare creature closed the remaining distance between us. I screamed, scrambling back against the wall. Rather than grab me, the form dove forward, entering my open mouth and my mind was no longer mine.

I was falling endlessly, snippets of memories rushing past me too quickly to count. Whispered commands tore through the abyss, pushing the blurred scenes this way and that.

The commands grew in volume until I hit the hard ground.

My three masters were circling the training ground. Master Eliza's green robes billowed around her small figure. She was weaponless, her stance relaxed and eyes shining as she circled. Master Yinzu waited serenely in blue, a bow and arrow trained at me, their eyes unblinking. And finally Master Jericho's large figure, cloaked in red, held a large two-handed sword casually in one hand. They made up the three rings of our Sun God's trial. Beyond them stood his golden flag.

I stood silently in the center. Shoulders loose, feet pointed toward the flag, also weaponless. I'd done this a hundred times by now, but this would be the last. I would not be leaving without the flag or my birthright.

Without warning, I kicked dirt at Yinzu and dove. An arrow protruded from the ground I'd just left. I was now trapped in a barrel roll with Eliza, that took us into Yinzu's line of fire. I kept spinning, my black leathers blending with her green robes as we grappled. When we stopped moving, I wrapped my legs around Eliza's neck. She tapped twice, publicly accepting her defeat before walking to the side of the training yard. I followed and was given a choice between a shield and axe. I gripped the shield tightly and turned toward Yinzu.

They drew and released arrow after arrow. I dodged most but caught several in the shield. One

hit in the same place as another and broke through, burying into my arm. I winced, dropping to a knee as my blood dripped into the dirt. They lowered their bow. And I, expecting that moment of mercy, lunged toward them. I was on them in a minute, grabbing the bow and looping it around their neck until they too, tapped out. I accompanied them to the fence as well. This time I was given the choice between a sword and bandages. I chose the sword.

Jericho continued to pace between me and the flag, waiting for the signal to begin. I adjusted the shield, breaking off the arrow that had punctured it, and threw the shaft into the dirt. Cracking my neck, I ran straight toward him. As he swung the sword, I threw the shield at his face. Changing his momentum to block the shield, I slipped behind him. Slashing at his bad knee, he took the hit without stopping, bringing the large sword down on top of me. Bringing my sword up with just enough time to block, I was knocked onto my back by his blow. Rather than keep still, I rolled a little further back from him and closer to my goal.

I did not once look at the flag, rather my focus was on the warrior in front of me. When my stance wavered, he spoke kindly, his deep voice full of concern.

"You've fought well, Rose, but perhaps we should try this again another time. Already you've littered the battlefield with your blood." I ignored his use of my informal title, a taunt that I'd not yet earned the one I craved.

"The ground looked thirsty. How could I deny it a drink, Master Jericho?" I panted with a smile.

"Generous as always." He huffed.

I clenched my shield arm, the blood dripping down my closed fist.

Then, with the speed of a cobra, I drew the arm back and let go. The arrowhead from the offensive arrow buried itself in the Master's shoulder and he dropped his sword with a cry. I ran for the flag, using every bit of my superior speed to evade his strong grasp. I didn't stop until I was gripping the crimson soaked gold in my bloodstained hand. Finally, I let out a cry of victory.

Master Jericho's eyes sparkled with pride as he held his shoulder. Master's Eliza and Yinzu approached with a large black trunk held between them.

"The flag if you please," Yinzu's husky voice rang out.

"Yes Master Yinzu," I answered loudly.

They placed the cloth against a seal that glowed brightly until the lid fell away. Eliza motioned for me to approach. The inside of the chest was a mirror of the night sky, and under a black cloth was the star sword. Master Eliza spoke, her voice sweet and low, soothing but firm as she commanded me.

"Claim your birthright, Daughter of thorns. May this sword light your path and eradicate your enemies."

All three continued in unison, "Made with the matter of a fallen star, no creature of night can withstand."

As the memory faded, I felt my resolve strengthen, and I swore on the memory of the star sword. Creatures or not, shadows or not, I'd find a way to succeed in my mission. I'd find a way to destroy her before she killed or corrupted me. Even if it meant playing her games, getting close to her. I'd do whatever needed doing, so long as it meant my people lived. Mimicking the walls of my thorn cloaked castle, I began fortifying my mind. I would not let her take my secrets and endanger my people. I thought I had given everything, but now I swore I would forfeit my very soul to deliver her ashes to my God.

The whispers retreated, the void gone, and I hung on. Death couldn't have me, not until I'd

brought another to its darkened door.

Four

It was the smell of jasmine, and a familiar swaying that woke me this time. Murky shapes transformed into an opulently upholstered carriage. The lack of windows and doors made it so the shades of wine were broken only by the presence of my enemy. Shocking expanses of her creamy skin were visible beneath her loosely laced tunic while a skintight pair of breeches hugged her generous curves. She leaned forward quickly, and a scream built at the memory of her touch, the cave, the invasion of my mind. Her gloved hand shot forward to cover my mouth.

“Believe me when I say shouting will cost you your life,” she threatened, eyes darting to the seamless ceiling. I paused, wondering if she was simply uninterested in hearing my screams in this enclosed space, or if we were traveling through dangerous territory. Deciding I was in no place to defend myself either way, I nodded my agreement. When she lowered her hands, I whispered my retort.

“You honestly expect me to be calm waking up with you after our last two encounters?”

“Thank you for not keeping me in a cage or dragging me behind your horse, Mistress. You’re so generous to keep me alive after threatening to kill you, Mistress.” She fluttered her eyes at me, fully committing to the role of who she’d like me to be.

“If you are lacking adoration, you’ll need to seek it elsewhere. I’ve not begged for my life, nor will I,” I responded flatly.

“Everyone could use more adoration Slayer, you should try it once in a while. Besides, I’m not the one that’s done the life-threatening here.”

“So despite your actions, because you’ve not threatened me with words, I’m to believe I have nothing to fear from you?” I scoffed, looking at the ceiling, where I could just make out a smattering of dots and lines.

“Listen little Slayer, you do not know me but I do not lie. The answers you are withholding could be of importance, so I will do what is necessary to obtain them. Tell me, if our roles were reversed, if I had something you needed, what treatment could I expect from your hands?” I held my tongue, unsure of what she already knew, and certain her claimed honesty was nothing but another clever lie. She’d already lied about the slayer’s being dead. Why wouldn’t she lie now? No, it was better to be asking the questions than trusting blindly.

“Perhaps if I already knew what you’d seen, I would elaborate.” I mused, picturing Celia’s best bluffing face as calmly as possible.

“Enough believe you’re worth sparing. However, if you’d be so kind as to divulge the remaining information I want, I’m sure you’d find the reward well worth it.” She spoke firmly, but not unkindly.

“What information is that?” I asked slowly, unsure of what games she might have planned.

Wondering what role I might be able to play to stay alive, and possibly still have her ashes.

"I need to know why you want to kill me, who sent you, where you got your blade, and why you seem so convinced the only way moving forward is with a satchel of my ashes." She said, leaning back as if certain I had no way of making that become reality.

"What would you give me for that information?" I ask, mimicking her pose with a touch less grace due to the restraints.

"No need to put on a show, little slayer. I know you think my particular death is your duty, but what I couldn't see was why. Now, If you want to fill me in on who hired you and how your master's came by that particular weapon, then you can be on your way."

"You truly have no plans to kill me?" I allowed my disbelief to color my tone. Hoping she'd see my hesitation as promising.

"Oh, I know you think your thorns are a threat, but compared to my actual enemies, they have the bite of a nettle plant. So, if you'd like to tell me who hired you, or even your price, I'd happily set you free or pay you to slay elsewhere to your heart's content. What do you say?" She pulled a heavy purse from behind her, patting its contents as if I was a sell sword.

"I... I need to think about it." I say, stammering again, letting my eyes linger on the gold as if it held any appeal to me. Just then, my stomach growled. I frowned, realizing I didn't know how long I'd been in the cave or this carriage. It could have been hours... or days.

Just then, a blob of cool shadow rolled across my feet before climbing her seat. It grew into a smaller version of the long-limbed nightmare I'd seen before, leaning forward to whisper into her ear. Her body stiffened and nodded, whispering instructions that had the creature disappearing again quickly. She moved forward quickly, flooding my nose with her Jasmine scent before another shadow wrapped around my eyes. I shivered at the increased awareness when she whispered into my ear.

"The food from your satchel is under your seat, as is a water-skin. Think on my offer. You'll not get a better one." The tip of her fang grazed the shell of my ear, triggering the insane desire to lean closer. I was relieved by the jolt of the carriage coming to an abrupt stop. The sound of rustling was followed by a rush of night air as she no doubt launched into flight. Moments later, my blindfold and restraints slipped off my skin. Years of training launched me into a defensible position. My vision blinked in and out at the sudden movement in my weakened state. Blinking away the dizziness, there was nothing beyond the empty sealed carriage.

I ran my hands across the dark velvet walls. Standing, I found the ceiling lines were subtle embroidery of constellations, several of which I didn't recognize. There were no detectable seams or handles, making exit and entry yet another mystery I was itching to solve. In my exhausted state, however, I was happy to chalk it up to more magic.

Crouching down, I found the rest of my provisions tucked under my seat. It wasn't much, but it was a mercy for an attempted assassin, I supposed. Chewing the aged meat, I stretched my cramped muscles, wondering how I could best sell my new identity as a sell sword and keep my true identity hidden. Had my training with Yinzu been enough or had the God intervened yet again? My throat tightened around the last of the food before washing it down with the remaining water. The pounding in my head lessened slightly, but I'd need much more to come close to satisfaction. Unable to pace, my legs bounced nervously. Why were we still stopped? Were we close to her keep? Was this carriage meant to be my holding cell? The bouncing of my leg increased to match my racing thoughts. My instincts sensed something my mind could not quite grasp. Perhaps I could pound on the carriage to demand answers... but then she'd been adamant about my silence before. Were there actual enemies nearby? Would they be the sort to help or hurt her prisoner? Although there was no proof I was her

prisoner now, my bonds had vanished.

A vice tightened across my chest as helplessness stole the stage of my mind. Perhaps I was overreacting, making something out of nothing, but as alarm bells continued to sound in my mind, I found my hand raised to pound on the carriage walls. Any danger out there had to be better than the ones imagined by my mind, right?

Wrong.

An earth-shattering roar knocked me from my feet and knocked any remaining air out of my chest.

Five

The roar was still ringing in my ears when I removed my hands from their protective position. My instincts screamed at me to run, that whatever creature had made that sound was our certain doom.

I was trapped. With no way to discover whatever new terror lurked. Another roar shook the carriage, and I unceremoniously threw myself under the less than protective seat. Trying to keep my heartbeat and breathing steady, I tried to remember the specifics of the rumors of entire villages being burned to ash. The church had claimed they were warnings from the Sun God that he had heard of the increasing sin in our community. Was that roar the sound of his fury? Or some dark God?

I'd heard some of the less faithful in a tavern questioning why our God would kill innocents rather than target the Mistress who tempted away the hearts of his followers. I had found the thought interesting, although I never got a chance to discuss it as I had not wanted to reveal where I'd been to my Father. Though the request to stop visiting gambling houses was said as my Father, not the King, he didn't take kindly to being disobeyed. Perhaps the unfaithful had been right, and it was a dragon all along. They'd meant to be extinct if ever existing in the first place but then it made more sense than our God making a mistake. Though why the priests would claim a dragon's fire, as holy, escaped me.

Another Roar rent the air. Was it closer or further away? I couldn't tell. What I did know was the carriage hadn't moved an inch since The Mistress left. Were we in a secure place or in the open? Was the carriage easily accessible from the outside or would I only be able to be freed by The Mistress and her magic? The dark carriage seemed to grow smaller, and my breaths became shallower. Was I running out of air? I'd read of people suffocating in collapsed caves, sealed in like tombs. Pounding on the side of the carriage was out of the question. If the wrong person, or the potential dragon, came to investigate, I'd be handing myself over on a platter. The succubus claimed she didn't want me dead yet, and I couldn't say the same for whatever else was out there.

Curling my knees closer to my chest, I tried to touch my slayer's mark, to reassure myself that I was not alone. That I was protected, and strong... but all I could feel was the rising panic. I had trained my entire life to fight, to avenge, to protect. And now I would die from my inability to reverse the fear of being helplessly confined.

When darkness began to fill the carriage this time, I sobbed aloud with relief.

The Mistress didn't so much appear as she collapsed into her seat, her horns slowly sinking into her skull. As she swayed forward, a larger nightmare creature than before materialized to prop her up. Ignoring me completely, the creature went to work mending her rent clothing and skin. I wasn't surprised to see that the ruffled white shirt and skin-tight pants had done little to nothing to protect her from the large claws that had left gashes across her arms and legs. Despite being relieved that I

wouldn't die here, I hated watching her being brought back to health while I was helpless to end her life. When the last of the wounds were knit with shadow, her eyes slid open. No longer golden, but glowing rubies.

I gasped, and those eyes met my own.

"Slayer," she spoke in a husky tone. "If we're going to make it back, I'll need a drink."

I looked at the stitched wounds. They were in no danger of bleeding out now so withholding my blood would do little to bring her closer to the grave. But with an unknown hoard of enemies around us, it could certainly spell my end.

If I had my weapons I might be able to fight my way out of a smaller hoard, to defensible ground if there was any nearby. But I did not, nor did I have any way of escaping this death box, or evading her and the creature. I could hope we'd both fall, but then her ashes would be scattered and I needed them to end the curse. Another roar sounded in the distance and with no other ideas of how to survive and break the curse, I nodded my consent quickly.

In a spurt of speed I couldn't follow, she'd hauled me up and over her lap before sinking her fangs into my neck.

The anxiety I'd felt for the last few hours disappeared, replaced by a rush of euphoria so strong I wilted into her hold. With each pull, I found my thoughts transforming, my body reacting in ways I'd never felt before. As she groaned into my neck, I felt my hands winding through the silky strands of her hair. I tightened my grip on the strands as my head grew lighter. Her tongue lapped leisurely. I squirmed in her hold, causing her to pull me closer. The friction had me stiffening with a gasp against the dizzying pleasure.

Releasing me, she tilted my head back to look into her eyes. They were gold again. The change captivated me, my tense muscles loosening as I felt... peace. I'd not felt that since awaking to the curse. But it was peace, not hatred, that I found looking into her eyes, like there was an answer there, hidden between the flecks of green and brown. If only I could ask the right question. I had moved closer, my hands now resting on her scalp. I realized the insanity of the situation at the same time she did. A look of horror skirted across her features, causing me to stumble off her lap and back to my seat. By the time I looked back, the horror was gone, replaced by a coquettish grin.

"It would seem having you along has its benefits, little slayer." She licked her blood-red lips with a smile before placing her hand on the side of the carriage. Shadows pulsed before the carriage was in movement once more.

"No blessing comes without cost." I spoke slowly, trying to banish the pleasure that lingered. I had heard of men being blinded by lust, but never before had I felt such dizzying pleasure. I'd stolen an innocent kiss, yes. But, due to my royal status and my preference for women I hadn't had many opportunities to experience more. The real problem wasn't that she was a woman. The issue was of all the women I'd feel something for. It was the one who cursed me. The one person I wanted and needed to kill more than any other. Perhaps this was simply misdirected blood lust?

Despite increasing the distance between us, it seemed every cell in my body was screaming at me to get nearer to her, to do any and all of the things I'd read about in the books I'd hidden beneath my bed. How could I feel this way toward my mortal enemy? Was it simply an enchantment? Or was I broken? I clenched my eyes shut, massaging them to try to ease the pounding in my head.

She continued talking, blissfully ignorant of my dilemma.

"Don't undersell yourself, I'm sure to the right bidder the last Slayer is worth at least a kingdom... and by my estimation, I've saved it three times. I believe that pays for more than one feeding, don't you?" I wracked my mind for how she'd gotten to that number. The first could be

sparing my life. The second was most likely to do with whatever she'd just fought off as it was no ally of mine... but how did she get to three? Perhaps she was bad at math. Most people were in my experience. However, not everyone had a fascination with counting cards and calculating speed. Either way it grated on my nerves. I was the warrior; I looked the way I did because I trained endlessly to be the warrior. Yet here I was, the not so dainty damsel in distress.

She brought me back to the present when she stroked the bite mark fondly, as if it were a bit of jewelry she admired rather than a sign of weakness. I took a steady breath, ignoring the vulnerability of my bare neck, taking comfort in my still-beating heart. As long as I had a heartbeat, I had hope.

"Let's get that fragile neck somewhere a bit more secure hmm, maybe get you freshened up?" She smiled familiarly, causing me to frown. Instinctively I'd like to reject any help from the woman I needed to murder, but remembering Celia's lessons I decided now was the time to play along. I may have lost the first hand or two, but that didn't mean I couldn't pull out a win in the end. I just had to let her get comfortable. Tallying my body's physical reactions to her in as detached a mindset as I could manage, I wondered whether I could make them into a sort of bluff.

I squirmed, unused to the increased circulation her bite had inspired. Unable to speak without betraying my emotions I went in favor of heated silence. Staring at the ceiling I prayed that this refuge was nearby, and that there would be food, and possibly spirits.

Six

The rattling of carriage wheels on stone was my only signal that we'd left the forest. Not long after I heard the deep timbre of a man's laugh and saw the answering spark of joy in her golden eyes before I was blindfolded again.

The subtle clinks of hinged mechanisms brought in air that didn't smell of sweat and blood which I gulped down greedily. The damp air smelled cruelly similar to home. It had the same musk and freshly cut herbs, the only noticeable difference being the lack of Heidi's cooking. Just as I was questioning the reality of the moment, a warm hand grabbed my own, causing me to jump. I hissed and clung to the warm hand as feeling rushed back to my feet.

My silent helper led me further into the space, taking turn after turn before several pairs of feet faded away. Hushed voices murmuring too quiet for my human ears to understand filled the echoing space. After a while of standing awkwardly in the dark my blindfold lifted. We were in a castle, an old one at that. The aged stone was a startling black rather than the soft grays and whites of my own. I took in the flags lining the hall, all in shades of red, blue, yellow, or green. Violet banners alone hung from the aged timber overhead. The patterns depicting houses and clans I'd never heard of. Odd. My mother had been particularly meticulous in my knowledge of houses spanning across the continent even covering the many isles at sea.

Looking down I saw an inlaid marble map of our mainland, Catalencia interrupted the grey flagstones. Rather than its current kingdoms, it was divided equally into five, the center the same purple as the banners above while the corners matched those on the walls all bearing a crest in gold. The Northeast corner was green with a golden arch, the Northwest blue with a golden mermaid, the Southeast red with a golden dragon breathing fire, and the Southwest was yellow with the image of a Griffin, and then in the center was an ancient tree crowned by stars. It felt important, and I tried to burn the map into my mind in hopes it might be something I could use.

The Mistress sent out shadows to attach to my throat, creating a leash to tug me closer to her and her large companion.

"Who's the pet, Mara?" The man asked, gesturing at me with an overly large ax. I felt a spike of heat go through me as he gestured to my leash and collar. A mix of anger, shame, and something else I couldn't quite name. He towered over the Mistress, at least a hand over six feet while she was only a few inches shy. For a moment I had the distinct realization that should we all stand in a line we'd resemble the nesting dolls one of my suitors had gifted me.

This man's long mahogany hair was partially braided back into a bun while the rest fell down his broad shoulders. As he turned to the Mistress for an answer, I saw he'd threaded bits of gold, jewels, and bones through the braids which brought out the golden browns of his skin.

Despite his informal addressing he looked at her like she was his God. I'd have no luck at finding an ally in him. He looked like the type to chop his own head off if she asked. If she found worshippers so boring, why was he the first to greet her? Or did she only find devotees of other faiths boring because they were harder to persuade to worship her? I was relieved at the wave of familiar disgust toward her and her giant minion. Perhaps I wasn't broken, and the previous feelings were just an enchantment after all.

"A mystery at the moment, Captain." She stated, laying a gloved hand on his muscled arm affectionately. Heat flashed in their locked brown and gold gaze. Something I recognized from the many couples I'd seen in taverns and around the city. Were they a couple? Or just physical? The distinction felt important for a reason I couldn't quite grasp.

He laughed, his long dark waves shaking. "Oh, is she to be a gift for me then? You know I love a good mystery." His dark eyes met hers with barely concealed glee. My heart dropped. Was I to be used as entertainment between mental assaults? Or did the mistress mean to have me tortured? So long as it did not kill me her promise would be kept. I narrowed my eyes in suspicion at the man, adding a mental note to kill him after the Mistress if I survived long enough.

"No, I'm afraid I have recruits I need you to focus on right now, Ravensford." She patted his chest in consolation and he put his hand over hers in what looked to be a sign of affection and understanding.

"Well come on then, are we keeping her with the others?" He asked. Motioning behind him with a shrug. The Others? Did they keep humans as slaves? Was I to be used as a blood slave? Or something worse? My breathing quickened, and I looked around frantically for an exit, no longer caring about being subtle. My footing was weak, I realized I'd never trained hungry.

Wrapping the leash around her hand a couple of times she waved him off in his current direction.

"She'll be staying with me for now, she has answers I need. Perhaps I'll let her out to play if she cooperates." She threw that in with a backwards glance and wink.

I turned to see he'd bowed at her retreat, sending a much slower, possibly threatening wink my way when he caught me looking. I glared, as if I could intimidate answers out of him in my bound state. He spun around, unbothered, whistling an unhinged tune, his axe thrown over a shoulder, on his way to torture some humans most likely. I added Captain Ravensford to my list, right under Mistress Mara.

My head was yanked to the side as we changed directions and I renewed my efforts in testing the shadow leash. Its cool material was smooth against my skin, but despite its silky texture, it was unyielding. I tried to memorize the stone halls, but they were identical, every window sealed by matching black stone. The only light was cast by flames was captured in glass globes over iron bases mounted to the wall. What kind of sorcery was this? Did she have enough magic to enchant and tame flame?

Walking into her suite was nothing like I expected. Rather than menacing darkness or evil incarnate, it was like stepping into a purple flower. Purple velvet curtains lined the majority of the walls. The same fabric engulfed a canopy bed large enough for a small family. A fireplace stood empty while more of the globes flickered in the corners. How could she afford such luxury when she only ruled animalistic vampires? Was it all from theft? It had to be, what other income could they handle? They could hardly farm or trade when restricted to the night. She had to be controlling the flames to allow them so close to the thick fabric.

She led me past the bed through a small arch into a large bathing chamber. If I thought the bedroom spoke of luxury, it was nothing compared to the opulence of this space. Hanging from the

ceiling was a chandelier of smaller globes, casting as much light as the setting sun. The floor was a river of thin, soft stones in purples, blues, and greens. Rising from the floor was a series of shining metal poles that emptied into a black marble soaking tub. Facing the strange set up was a gilded floor-length mirror, a curtained off stall, and some violet upholstered seating. It looked like a partly backless church stall but with cushioning.

She approached the soaking tub and twisted the knobs until through some sorcery a spout of steaming water poured out of an empty tube. I caught a glimpse of my wide eyes in the water's reflection before she added in a scoop of white salts that filled the air with a scent I was no longer associating with the small white star-shaped flower. She attached the leash to the clawed foot of the tub,

"Strip." she commanded, lowering herself onto the upholstered bench.

"Not with you watching," I said as firmly as possible, unable to keep my eyes from darting to the water. I'd never been comfortable with my body, my lack of curves and the many scars from training made my body an unfortunate consequence, as my mother called it.

To my surprise, she wordlessly reclined her head to stare at the stony ceiling so I could freely undress.

"Why must you stay in here at all?" I complained, rather than acknowledge another shred of decency.

"I've known too many that would see a full tub as an opportunity rather than a mercy." She spoke softly to the ceiling, and I felt a knot of emotions form in my throat at the unexpected tenderness.

I peeled off the stiff clothing and entered the hot water which was pain-edged bliss. I scrubbed my aggravated skin softly, worried the salts would sting any torn skin. Going to unravel my braid I remembered the loss anew. Dunking my head under the water I scrubbed the scalp and let a few tears loose where they couldn't be seen. It was only hair... and it made cleaning it much faster, and it would be harder to grab in a fight. I emerged to take a deep breath. Leaning against the edge of the tub I pulled my limbs in before looking at her.

She had started to get up from her seat, and the look of concern quickly dropped from her face when she saw I'd had no intention of filling my lungs with anything but air. Her loose tunic had fallen to the side giving the distinct impression her well-endowed chest was about to escape. I cleared my throat loudly, as if they would reverse direction at the sound.

"Why do you have a... a church stall in your bathing chamber?" I asked, wondering for the first time if she had a God.

She blinked, collecting herself before answering, "It's not a stall, it's a chaise."

At my confused look she continued.

"You could say it's used for a different kind of worship, little slayer, we succubae need more than blood to be truly satisfied." She licked her lips slowly. Whatever ease I'd felt before was gone. Looking over the tub's rim I stopped. She'd never moved but my clothes were gone.

"Where's my Tunic? My Breeches? The Leathers?" My voice rose with each question.

"Are you done then?" She stood, and I sank deeper into the murky water, my only privacy.

She sent shadows into the water, they wrapped around my nakedness, draining the water and drying me as they went until I was decently covered. I stood, nervous to be so fully at her mercy as the drip from my shorn hair reminded me that as soon as I was unconscious I had been robbed of something I loved.

"Come with me." She spoke walking back through the arch to a large wardrobe.

Despite knowing my long-term plan was to indulge her whims until she let her guard down, I

couldn't help but wish I was on the rack if it meant avoiding dresses.

Seven

Her wardrobe was larger than any I'd seen, one length containing long and elaborate gowns most of which seemingly embroidered with patterns of the night sky. I would most likely drown in them, her height and feminine curves far exceeding my own.

After discarding several gowns into a pile nearby, she brought a crimson dress over to me. Turning her head sideways as her eyes darted between the gown and my face, she grunted in approval before gesturing for me to sit. She then summoned more shadows, her hands moving in a blur while fabric fell in long scraps to the ground. When she was done. There, in the place of the full skirted wonder, was a simple red gown with impossibly intricate embroidery of a thornless rose. She threw it in my lap in a wordless command.

Maybe she could read my thoughts and was going to torture me with wordless insults. I reluctantly slipped the gown on over the shadows, who seemed to place the laces in my hands. I laced it up slowly, mentally cursing the loss of Celia and at the slight of the embroidery.

Turning back towards her I froze. She'd begun to strip. Her torn tunic was tossed onto the floor unceremoniously, and I found myself face to face with the large curves of her breasts barely concealed by shadow. My body quickly, and inconveniently, recalled the euphoria her bite had inspired. She raised her leg to rest on the foot of the wardrobe, giving me a good view of the inside of her shadow speckled thigh. Running her graceful hands down the thick tensed muscle she gathered the magic stitches to pool in her hand. In their wake there was no wound, not a single mark.

Her skin was flawless in an otherworldly way, pale as a star in the night that was her long black hair. Unraveled, it hugged her modestly like the paintings of merfolk, clinging to the pillow curves of her stomach before slipping between her strong legs as if no other covering was necessary. I felt the growing urge to reach out my hand, to touch her instead of harm her. A sharp pain tore through my heart at that. Was I so easily bewitched to forget my oaths?

"I have no issues with you watching." She purred. How long had I been staring? My face flamed and an irrational urge to clarify I would be murdering her not admiring her. I doubted that would earn me any points, so I remained silent.

"I'm afraid I don't have any shoes your size. Once yours are cleaned, we will assess the damage, if necessary I will then see about making some of your size."

"Would it be possible to borrow clothes from another vampire?" I ask, disliking being surrounded by her distracting scent and clothed by her luxury. It was confusing and made each swishing step hard to cling to my hate.

"Absolutely not." She said firmly, replacing the dresses she'd removed to their proper place before looking for her own gown.

"Why? Would it not be convenient to find someone closer to my size? Preferably with breeches and tunics instead of gowns?" I ask, trying to sound reasonable while not drawing attention to how poorly I'd laced the gown, or how much I disliked its limited movement.

"Regardless of convenience you are mine. You'll either wear something of mine, and be allowed a limited sort of freedom, or you can wear nothing and be confined to my chamber. Either of those choices suit me." What did she mean I was hers? Her prisoner? If not that, why didn't she say that? Wait, did she say wear nothing?

"This is inhumane," I responded, referencing the flustered confusion that idea inspired as well as the command she'd put me under.

"No. Murder is inhumane. Now, get on the bed." She gestured to the purple canopy while she slipped on a silk gown embroidered with purple flowers over her shadows.

"What?" I panicked, the implications of sharing a bed too much for me to take in, even if it was large enough for four of us.

"I have business to attend to elsewhere and doubt it's the type of business you're amenable to witnessing." She spoke so matter-of-factly I wondered if she meant torture, or murder.

She pulled me to her bed, the purple I admired previously now seeming to smack of poison. Rather than strangle me however she lashed the shadows to the post before patting my cheek. I pulled on them to no avail, there was only a few feet of slack so I could walk to the foot of the bed or roll across the entirety of the bed, no further.

"Maybe another time I'll let you watch pet, but if you're concerned about modesty, I doubt this is the type of entertainment you'd enjoy." My heart stopped for a completely different reason. Of course, what had she said earlier? Her succubus nature needed more than blood. My cheeks flushed as she walked away slowly, her hips moving in a hypnotic rhythm. Unable to look away I was shocked when she turned back to face me at the door. I shot my gaze to the floor, hoping that was more natural than trying to meet her eyes.

"A Dreadling, or Nightmare Creature as you call them, will be sure to bring you some food and drink while I'm gone, I promise none of it's poisoned so eat up. You'll need it to replenish the blood you gave." I looked up about to protest the idea of being left alone with one of those things but she was already out the door, turning the lock with a click.

Eight

The dreadling delivered the food quietly, making no move to approach my defensive crouch behind the bed, leaving the tray on the far side of the bed before leaving and locking the door.

The food was simple but hearty and served without utensils. I alternated between tipping the food into my mouth and using the bread to scoop the meat into my mouth. The beef in the stew was especially filling, and I found myself using the last of the bread to wipe the bowl clean. It felt like heaven to be full again, and after placing the tray on the floor I laid down with a sigh.

I stayed motionless in her purple bed, enveloped in her Jasmine scent, I found myself incapable of sleep. My mind was unable to digest the events of the last week. How quickly I had gone from warrior princess of an entire kingdom to the prisoner of her mortal enemy... who had possibly saved her from a creature of myth? Should I be grateful? I was alive, fed, washed, clothed... and deemed hers, whatever that meant. I supposed if she wasn't going to lock me up or torture me, perhaps I could get closer to her. I could pretend to play her games, let her feed, learn the layout of the castle, find the other humans, coordinate our escape, and make my final move. Falling into the planning felt like a game of chess where I could only see half the other players' pieces, but still I moved my own, wondering if there was a way that I'd be able to walk away from this unscathed.

The lock clicked open, hours later, and before I could decide how I felt personally about the entire thing. I wondered how much pleasure a succubus needed to survive, whether she'd gone to the giant or another succubus, or perhaps several at the same time. The Captain looked like he'd be loath to share, but then he did look like he'd die to please her.

"Do you need anything, pet?" She purred walking till she could lean against the bedpost. Her gown hugged every inch of her. My face turned red... again. I was not built for subterfuge, something my parents had seen early on. I'd happily thrown myself into combat. Simple, straightforward, killing. Even sleight of hand was more straightforward than facing and concealing the emotions that seemed to boil over when she was near.

"Don't call me that." I sat up, annoyed at my lack of sword and silver thorns.

"Oh? And what should I call you then?" She knelt on the bed with heavy eyelids. Was she still unsatisfied? The thought entered unbidden. Why did I care? I felt my annoyance turn to irrational rage and the first words that came to mind came spilling out.

"Slayer Rose, preferably, as you would have seen in your assault on my mind."

"You'd like me to call you Slayer? In a keep full of vampires? Someone does have a death wish it would seem." She raised her eyebrows at me before continuing, "As for the dreadling dives, you are free to stop our interrogations at any time by providing me with the information I require. Would you like to do so now?" At that she scooted closer to me eagerly.

“I can’t.” I puffed, still annoyed but flustered at the logic she had to remove my title.

“You can’t or you won’t?” she teased, as if this was just a game rather than my people, my life, and my entire purpose at stake.

“I can’t!” My frustration spiked again, stoked higher with the fear that I had no way of delaying or denying the dreadling assaults without putting myself at risk.

“Very well you can’t. Well, shall I simply call you Rose then?” she asked, deftly moving the conversation on, letting her eyes trace the rose she’d embroidered on my person.

I shook my head, the idea of being called Rose without my title or thorns felt... wrong.

I recalled her previous comparison of those thorns being a mere prick of nettles in comparison to her other enemies. Perhaps she wasn’t wrong, I’d been arrogant to think I could beat her with physical prowess alone. But while I didn’t roar or have claws that tore through a vampires flesh... I was going to succeed.

“You can call me Nettle,” I spoke decisively.

The corner of her lips tugged upwards as if she knew and was amused by the name.

“Nettle it is then. You may call me Mistress.”

“Does only the Captain call you Mara then?” I asked, glancing at my fingernails as if the answer didn’t bother or interest me at all.

“Only my Lovers call me Mara,” she briefly observed her own fingernails before dropping them to trace the curve of her chest. “Why Nettle, would you like to call me Mara?” she licked her lips slowly, looking hungrily at my collar.

I shook my head quickly, forcing my gaze up to the canopy where it was safe.

“Very well,” she sighed as if disappointed. Was she disappointed? That didn’t make any sense... unless she really was unsatisfied. Could I satisfy her? I clenched my jaw tighter at the images that were now taking root in my mind. Her lips back on my neck, my hands tangled in her hair, this time our lips would take turns trailing lower... What in heaven’s name was wrong with me? I clenched my legs against the growing need.

“It’s been a long day, for both of us. I’m well versed in the disappointment of missing your target. So while I know it won’t mean much coming from me, everything will look better after we get some rest.” Her weight left the bed, and I looked instinctively to know where she was.

Her back was to me as shadows made quick work of the laces in her gown. Before I could look away, it cascaded slowly down her skin. The fabric defied gravity as it slid down like a lovers caress, leaving behind questionable lace as her only covering. I turned around until I heard her slipping under the covers.

“Remember, smothering and strangling attempts will just piss me off.” She warned me in a dry tone, but by the time I turned back around her eyes were closed.

Rather than risk strangling her, or undressing near her, I stayed above the covers still fully dressed. Her breathing evened out before stopping completely like it was simply a bad habit left over from her humanity. Meanwhile, I stared at her still form, my own breathing sped up. I was close enough to touch her, or kill her rather than drag a blade across that ridiculously smooth skin.

Logically I wanted that, needed it really, except that she hadn’t been anything like I was expecting. Never needlessly cruel, promising to keep me alive and let me go after I surrender the information she needs. Why not torture me? Why not give me to the Captain? Why keep me in her bed, dress me in her clothes? Why offer for me to be her lover? Her lips had parted ever so slightly in sleep, giving the impression that she was only moments from speaking, or making a sound. If that sound had straight forward answers I found that I was yearning for it. I ached to understand the unexpected tug that made

me want to press my lips to hers.

Rolling away from the sight of her I slowed my breaths until I could think straight. She wanted to know who had sent me, why I wanted her dead. I could hardly tell her I wanted her dead because she cursed me as a child, or that the person who'd sent me was my God who came to me in a vision and struck a deal with me. She'd either put me back into the same curse, kill me, or throw me in a cell for lunacy. No, not answering was wiser. Perhaps I could reveal other things to gain her trust? What could I reveal that wouldn't give my identity or purpose away more? Yinzu would know, or Celia. How I longed for them both.

The darkness of my lids faded slowly into the dreamless landscape that had been my only form of rest since the bargain. My heartbeat filled the space like a war drum. Reminding me I'm miles from resting, that I'll never rest until the curse is broken or I'm dead. Sometimes I wondered which I really wanted. As my heart rate increased, I wondered if I'd wake, or if I would simply be more exhausted the next day, being trapped without true sleep.

Wandering the darkness, I tried to conjure light or shapes. Anything to break up the monotony of black while missing the times my God would visit with light and wisdom. With no sign of him I adopted Master Yinzu's meditative stance and attempted to convince myself that I was doing this by choice. That I was not trapped, only deep in thought and could wake whenever I opened my eyes.

Nine

I didn't sleep, nor did I see my God in meditation, something that irked me as I could not inform him or gather his advice on my current situation. Forcing me to continue my inner battle alone, I took turns staring at the sleeping being beside me and trying to decide why she felt like both my keeper and my nightmare.

My incessant stress spiked when a nightmare creature, a dreadling, rolled under the door and began its disturbing transformation from a sweet blob into a thing worthy of its name. The gold eyes ignored me in favor of its Mistress, a long-clawed hand reached out and brushed aside her hair before tapping her alabaster skin.

Her eyes found their twins, and I watched in disturbed wonder as their pupils expanded till the gold was just a thin ring. They stayed that way until the Nightmare released its hold on her.

"Thank you, Roya. Rest now." She traded places with the creature, and I scooted further down the bed, embarrassed by how close I'd gotten to her on the large thing. She disappeared into the wardrobe for a matter of seconds before exiting in a full gown. She strode to the door, and I made a sound of confused dismay.

"You're just going to leave me here with that thing alone... tied to the Bed?" Surely not.

"Yes, unless you have changed your mind and you would prefer to tell me who sent you and swear to bring no harm to me or my subjects?" She ran her fingers through her hair softly, using the shadows to first detangle and then elegantly weave the locks into a crown.

"And if I refuse? Will you instruct your creature to attack me in your absence?" I lifted my chin, hiding my trembling hands beneath the covers.

"Her name is Roya, and she's a lot nicer than you, Nettle. Aren't you Roya?"

The clawed hand waved her off exhaustedly, a move I pretended not to recognize as endearing.

"Exactly," Mara said to Roya as if words had accompanied the movement. Addressing me again, she continued, "She needs to rest and will do nothing but fetch you food and ask the shadows to allow you access to the lavatory. I'll be back later, save your rude behavior for my return. Until then, Nettle, remember Mistress is watching." She tapped her temple with a smile before sealing the tomb behind her.

If I didn't know better, I'd say she was enjoying herself. What was I missing?

Ten

I'd opted to sit on the floor at the furthest distance possible from the bed while leashed, an arrangement that Roya approved of. She'd thrown me a cushion and closed the curtains between us before splaying out. Her overly long legs hung off the end and I trained my eyes on them like an unwelcome spider. Convincing myself as long as I knew where she was, I wasn't in immediate danger. Only when her snores shook the frame did I decide to pass the time with some training.

First, I did the arm, leg and core strengthening practices that Master Jericho swore by. The ridiculous stretching positions Master Eliza favored. Finishing with the mind numbing meditation and thought exercises, Master Yinzu drilled when separated from the bow, using her snores as a sort of white noise to clear my mind. When the sound stopped, I shuffled backwards, putting as much distance between us as I could, the leash straining as the curtains parted.

Her hands were large enough to swallow her face, something she ignored as she tried to rub her eyes with her massive, closed fists. When they lowered at last, I saw her drowsy eyes land on me, widening as she took in my obvious fear. She made gestures, her eyes widening and narrowing in what might have been speaking expressions except for the fact I could hear nothing.

"If you're trying to talk to me, you're going to have to speak louder. I can't hear a word you're saying." I intoned.

Her hand drags down her face in exasperation before she offers her hand.

"Nope," I said, shaking my head. "I'd rather not go on another nightmare dive, if that's what you're offering." Nauseous by the very idea of it.

She gestured to my ears, then back at her lack of mouth before pointing to her hand.

"The meaning of that was lost on me," I said honestly, my confusion slightly lessening my fear.

Her head dropped to look at the ceiling in annoyance. She looked at me seriously, holding up a finger to be sure she had my attention.

"Yes, I'm looking," I said.

She pointed at me and then her other hand and made a talking gesture.

"Me, talking," I said.

She nodded. Then she pointed at herself and made a talking gesture with the other hand.

"You talking." I clarified.

She nodded faster. Then she made the two hands hold each other, letting go to speak to each other and then pointed to my hand.

"If I hold your hand... you can speak in my mind?"

She clapped vigorously before holding her hand out for me to take. I looked at it wearily; the Mistress had said she wouldn't do any dives today. Could I trust her?

“You promise you won’t go into my head?” I hedged, looking around to see if there was some lever labeled ‘escape’ that I’d somehow missed.

She nodded, making the talking gesture with her hands again before holding it out for me to take.

I came closer, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath before I put my hand into her overly large shadowy grip.

Oh thank the stars, I was going to die of boredom if you didn’t agree. Hello Nettle! I’m Roya! What do you want to do today? Also, what did you do to your dress? Her voice sounded like the tinkling of a bell, completely different from her otherwise monstrous appearance.

“Hi... Roya?” I looked down at my stained dress. “I... don’t like to keep still, so I did a bit of training.” I looked up to see her hand had risen to cover her lack of mouth in shock.

Don’t you know better than to train in Chiffon? Oh, The Mistress will be displeased if you’ve injured yourself.

“What else was I supposed to do? It’s not like they gave me a book to entertain myself.” I scoff.

Oh, would you like a book? I can fetch one now while I get your food?

“Umm... sure, if that’s allowed. I don’t think I can train anymore, anyway.”

Alright! Please sit on the bed and rest until I return!

She rolled into a ball and disappeared beyond the locked door. Well, it seems the mistress hadn’t been lying about her. She was nice. At least for a creature that could steal your memories and make you relive your worst nightmares.

...

She returned quickly, an enormous book under the tray of food, which I quickly inhaled. Roya tidied the space while I ate, returning eagerly with her outstretched arm when I’d finished.

“*Are you ready to read?*” She gestured to the Book whose title was bright, the first line in a language I didn’t recognize. The second, smaller line read “The Fall of the Fae.”

“What’s this language?” I asked, tracing the odd runes.

“*It’s the language of the fae.*” She breathed, as if the fae were more than a myth or legend. Although, remembering whose bed I was on, and who I was talking to, perhaps I didn’t know as much as I thought I did. The thought disturbed me.

“How will I read it then?” I ask, opening the book to see the same map as before. The banners from the hall were listed on the page beyond. The name Ravensford captured my eye next to a yellow banner, with a raven holding a key.

“*You will see, trust me.*” She spoke gently, turning the pages until the first chapter was visible. Placing our bound hands onto the first page.

The font glowed underneath, sparking blue until streams of fog rose to form a moving image of fae racing beneath the heavy canopy of trees.

I sat back with a gasp, the images shifting to an aerial view of the map from the previous page. Only now the borders glowed in different colors.

“*The courts were split by element; earth, water, fire, and air.*” She pointed to the four corners, each court flaring when their element was called.

“If these four were the elemental fae, then what did the purple kingdom rule?” I ask, pointing to the middle kingdom.

“*They were charged with the most important element. The Soul.*” Roya’s other hand rested gently over her chest.

“The soul? So they were like priests?” I ask, imagining fae in the white robes of the sun god, I shook the image away, disturbed by it for some reason.

"In a way, mainly they dealt in dreams. In matters of the heart and mind. In healing the unseen and seen. The fifth court were the Keepers of the Wood, of Avalon's heart." Her tinkling voice faded as the map zoomed in to show the Wood, full of life and laughing fae. The Dragons and feathered fae swooped down from floating islands while dryads and nymphs wove between trees. The wood continued to the North where elusive marble-skinned fae dove into tunnels and merfolk splashed along rivers and seas.

"This wood?" I asked incredulously. "It's different from the Dreadwood." I traced the smoking pictures of vibrant green and red leaves dripping from their boughs. The complete opposite of the twisted dead branches that made up the entirety of the Dreadwood.

"It is... and it isn't," she says squeezing my hand gently before skipping several chapters to find another. A shroud of shadows bound this chapter which she absorbed into herself.

"Our wood was one of life, of mischief, of chaos, the perfect playground. Then the humans arrived. They soon decided the Wild Wood was too alive, too mischievous, too unpredictable, and so some of them attempted cutting it back only to find their axes broken, their swords rusting overnight, and unable to spark a flame. It became apparent to them at that point they could either make alliances, or leave. Most joined with the druids, who convinced the wood to recede to allow for farming. Others with the earth fae who preferred the rocky cliffs and islands to the east. Those with a lingering love of the sea mingled with the merfolk, but almost none found favor with the folk of the south."

"Why?" I ask, their floating islands seeming to call to me the most.

"We were untamed, and so our wood stayed wild, our floating islands a haven for all our kind. The humans grew, and with them came kingdoms that declared we were hiding some great treasure behind our impassable wood, or within our islands. So a king struck a bargain with an unknown force that promised him and his people the necessary strength and immortality to far outlast any of the fae."

I saw a King on his throne shaking hands with a blurred figure, drinking from a golden chalice only to clutch his throat in pain. His eyes rolled back as all life drained from his skin. The surrounding guards dropped their weapons, bowing in pain. The smoke changed, showing an entire kingdom dropping to the ground, curled up in pain until it returned to the King, his eyes glowing red.

"Those that survived the change became an army, one he directed toward the Wild Wood. The Fae were arrogant, too used to their immortality to care if a predator bit them, too certain of their strength to believe a human could best them. And so we fell, and with our fall weakened the wood we loved so well." She said, the chord of her voice changing to a discordant, minor tune. I squeezed her hand reflexively and the corners of her eyes crinkled in gratitude.

"Why tell me this? You have no reason to trust me." I finally managed. Though there was no reason for me to believe any of what I saw was true, there was something about it that called to me, that seemed to lessen the ever-present veil of hatred in my mind.

"I have a thousand reasons to trust you. Memories do not lie. I know you see all vampires as your enemy. That they are the strong against the weak, but not all vampire kind are the monsters you've seen. I hope you'll allow yourself enough grace to believe the truth when you hear it." She paused, brushing her hand down her legs as if to smooth a skirt that wasn't there before continuing. *"Besides, it's as much my story to tell as anyone's in the keep, though I had to borrow Ravensford's copy. So I'd appreciate it if we kept that between us."*

The idea of him owning a book felt preposterous, although his family seal did have a key. And he had said something about loving mysteries. Perhaps there was more to the hulking brute than met the

eye.

“Your secret is safe with me,” I say, handing the book back to her. She took it with the empty tray.

“The Mistress will be returning soon so I’ll leave you for now. Just know, that not everything is what it seems. Especially when it comes to matters of the heart.”

With that cryptic message she was gone. Perhaps she’d belonged to the fifth court. Maybe she was trying to heal me of some wound I wasn’t aware of. However, it still didn’t make sense as to why she would volunteer so much information without reciprocation.

Eleven

“Roya told me you trained all day, still planning on killing me then are you?” She spoke while discarding her gown, slowly again.

So that was to be our cover, the dress was certainly stained enough to look like I’d spent the whole day training. I called up the anxiety from this morning to craft my answer.

“You mentioned that this keep is full of vampires that might not be amenable to the presence of a Slayer. I also know you keep humans here, though not how they’re viewed by these vampires. Should my presence be made known, I like to know I can defend myself. Despite being on a leash.” I spat out the last part, as if it was a handicap she was imposing to my fighting form rather than an open degradation.

“So despite telling you I’d protect you, you still feel in danger.” She seemed insulted by the thought.

“I’m leashed to a bed, I’m not sure how you expect me to not feel vulnerable to attack,” I state, ignoring for the moment that I’d overcome that fear with Roya. Enjoyed her presence even.

“I gave you my word, told you I don’t lie.” She paced closer, her skirts flicking behind her.

“So because you promised you wouldn’t hurt me... or lie... I should feel safe stripped of my weapons, in unfamiliar territory and clothes, leashed to the bed.”

“Most people would be paying me good money to have them leashed to my bed, dressed in the clothes I tailor-made for them from high-quality cloth no less.”

“Then leash them to the bed!” I shouted, ignoring the twisting in my stomach at the picture. It wasn’t difficult since we were having this conversation with her mostly in the nude.

“You seem conflicted by that idea. Do you have any idea why that might be Nettle?” She smiled wickedly, as if smelling my moment of weakness.

“Of course I’m not conflicted!” I hiss, my teeth clenching as I berate myself for the emotions that rise to the surface. Perhaps I shouldn’t have trained so hard, or fallen into Roya’s story, it left me exhausted and emotional.

“Very well, maybe we should test that theory.” She removed the leash from its post on the bed and strode quickly to the bathing chamber.

I strained against the wrinkled sweat stained dress in an attempt to match her stride. The bath was already full and steaming when she wrapped the leash around the tubs clawed foot.

“Now, a few things need to happen while you’re still confident. We need to burn that dress, and we both need to bathe. I’ve already told you why I don’t trust you alone here so my question to you is, would you prefer to go first or should I?”

“Do you have a preference?” I asked, wondering if now was the time to start getting closer to her.

"I always prefer to bathe first, why little slayer? Do my preferences mean something suddenly?" she asked dryly, looking longingly at the hot bath that was quickly losing steam.

"I would like to make a proposal. I will take the second bath, and wait in here as you prefer... if you'll promise not to use the nightmare creatures on me again." Now I knew Roya followed her commands, perhaps this deal would allow me to keep breathing anytime they appeared out of thin air.

"That's hardly a fair bargain." She made to walk away from the bath so I stepped into her path, forgetting for a moment how scantily clad she was. My eyes stopped at the base of her throat and my hands were a breath away from touching her chest. I stepped back and dropped my arms to my side so quickly it felt as if I were completing a drill rather than trying to strike a deal.

"Then I will... I will let you drink my blood. As you need... up to once a day." I tacked on at the end, unsure of how frequently they needed to feed to stay alive.

"Generous, and I can't say it isn't tempting but I still need information." She said with a sigh... but her eyes were drifting between my throat and the water. She wanted this.

"Alright, I'll give you information... but since it won't be what you need to qualify me for freedom, I'd like something in return. A truth for a truth." I state, as if this wasn't my original intent, as if it was a difficult compromise I was being forced to make.

She looked me up and down, and I felt a bit of sweat gather at my back dampening the salty stiff material. Her nose wrinkled again before she asked, "And what assurance do I have that you aren't going to lie or break this deal? You are human and inherently deceptive."

"I will swear on whatever you wish that I will not deceive you, all I wish is to avoid another assault on my mind... while also feeling a little less lost in the situation I now find myself in," I swore.

"Very well, I will not use the nightmare creatures without your consent, if you agree I will bind you in the old ways."

"I agree," I said without hesitation, unwilling to go through the constant terror of a possible mind invasion.

She opened her thumb on one of her fangs that was bared in a wicked smile. "Give me a drop of blood then Nettle, and we can seal the deal."

...

Despite getting exactly what I'd wanted to allow me to get closer to her while also avoiding another episode from Hell I felt as if I had bitten off more than I could chew as I watched her bite into my thumb.

Placing the two wounds together she bound them with shadows.

"I, Mara hereby swear not to use the dreadlings on Nettle without her consent under the conditions that I am allowed to feed on her once daily at her discretion. I also swear to tell her an equal truth for each truth she tells me." The bathing chamber's temperature rose with each word and I was sweating anew by the time it was my turn to swear.

"I... Nettle, hereby swear to offer up my blood and true information under the condition that the nightmare... dreadlings, will not be used on me without my consent and an equal truth is told for each of mine."

"May the star Aleta, binder of truth, seal our bond." A burst of light between our thumbs dispelled the shadow binding and when I looked at where a cut should be there was a scar shaped like a burst of light.

Looking up in search of answers I saw her stripping the last of her underthings off.

The scars down her back flickered into view behind her hair as she walked away, her long legs

taking a suspicious amount of time to carry her to the tub. Giving me ample time to look away, I didn't.

She eased herself into the water with her back facing me once her knees touched the bottom she pivoted to face me before continuing. I didn't have to pretend to enjoy the purposeful unhindered view. I let my eyes take their fill.

It was part of the game we were playing, I decided. She'd use her body to draw me in and I'd act like I was falling under her spell. It was a glorious thrill, pretending we only hungered for the other in ways that would not lead to our ultimate end.

"You've surprised me today Nettle." She said with a smirk.

"I could say the same," I said dryly, wagging my thumb.

"The scar isn't even the best part." She said with a wink.

"You going to tell me what is?" I say, trying in vain to repress the panic rising as I realized in my haste I'd not asked about the consequences. Knowing Roya's story had lulled me into complacency.

"Hard to say... Do you have an equally important piece of information to trade?" She said with her head tilted back, massaging her scalp with one of her potions.

"Depends on the effect I suppose," I say, making my way to the chaise where a patch of shadows appeared to separate my dress from the velvet.

"Well either way it'll last the rest of your life, so most would say it would be worth a lot... though I suppose you aren't known for valuing your life very high." So she'd skipped the pleasantries and small truths I was planning on telling in favor of a larger one. One I'd been hoping to save for later. Perhaps if I played off, its importance I could return to small truths.

"An occupational hazard I've been told," I say flippantly.

"It's been the contrary in my experience... martyr's make shitty sell swords," she began scrubbing her arms, slowing down as the movement drew her chest closer to the surface of the tub. Focus. I needed to focus.

"Why? They're more likely to face any danger." I said, swallowing against the collar that seemed to be a little tighter than before.

"And less competent in measuring the danger they're equipped to survive. It's the selfish that survive. The ones starving for life who anticipate the minor things that could get them killed. Like dropping their weapon at a fire made with dreadwood for example."

"Perhaps." I said, unwilling to give anything away, but filing away the need to research the properties of a dreadwood fire. This keep had to have such things documented, since it was likely in the heart of the forest. Perhaps the keep's Library would have other information that would fill in the gaps of whatever she might reveal to me.

She rinsed the last lotion from her skin before standing and draining the water.

"Wait!" I cried out, my raw skin cracking now and my pride lessening in yearning for any potions that might help.

"I can smell your blood, you'll need fresh water so nothing can cause infection. I'll inform the staff why we had to draw a second bath."

"...Oh." was all I could manage at the thoughtfulness. Perhaps it was just another level of the game, she just needed me alive.

"No need to think so hard Nettle, you have information I need. Get those memories ready while we try to get that dress off of you."

"Wait, we?" I said,

"I can try to just use the shadows if you prefer, but my control of them won't be as gentle or

precise if I'm not also involved."

She'd already seen me mostly naked and hadn't mentioned my lack of femininity. Hadn't sneered or done anything beyond continuing to flirt endlessly. Yet knowing she'd be the one undressing and helping me felt more intimate. But then... I needed her to begin to trust me, had already struck a bargain for that purpose... and perhaps this would speak louder than anything I might reveal in our game of truths. I knew there was no way I'd be able to remove the dress myself, and as I shifted on the chaise, I felt the sting of salt in the wounds she'd smelled.

"Alright then, just... be quick." I spun around quickly, fighting every instinct to not turn my back on her.

I was relieved by the audible splashing steps she took; it was the first time I'd ever heard her walk. Perhaps this was her way of acknowledging my vulnerability. Or perhaps she was just too tired to stay silent.

As she began tugging on the laces, I felt the telltale cool silk of her shadows slipping between my skin and the fabric, both ruined by misuse. I'd never had to train in fine fabric before and didn't realize it would chafe to this degree. The shadows acted like a barrier while she slid the fabric down and off of me. She took such care, showing me more tenderness than I'd ever received before. It made me warm, the hatred and anger further retreating leaving warmth and confusion in their wake.

Her hands hovered as I made my way to the full bath, still clothed in her shadow. Despite her hands never making contact I felt especially aware of them, of the pain I'd once experienced from them... of the pleasure they tauntingly promised.

The bath was neither hot nor cold and still she hovered, the shadows still in place while she added what seemed to be lightly milled grain.

"Am I meant to be your meal then?" I said lowering myself into the bath-made stewpot.

"Only if you wish to be." She said with an expression that sent heat rushing through me. Was she actually interested or just saying what might get me to reveal what she needed.

"I did offer you a feeding... though I'd hope your promise of safety would apply to that." I said, wondering if perhaps I had created an insinuation where there was none.

"I was talking of another type of feasting, of which I believe you were fully aware. Though I'll not drain and turn you if that's what you meant by your facetious pivot."

Her dark head between my legs. My hands buried in that maddeningly smooth hair bringing her closer to feel what it was to be the meal for an insatiable beast.

I turned redder still, but despite the increased circulation the baths grain water soothed away all previous stinging.

"What bit of information do you think worthy of the oath's effects? Or am I meant to guess?" I said, continuing to avoid acknowledging the continued offer of pleasure, or the images they inspired.

"Something tells me any information I specifically request will only discourage your open participation." How did she already know me so well? Was it her time spent in my mind with the dreadlings, or was I simply predictable? She wanted a story, something that could give her insight into what she actually wanted to know, why I was here, who I was, why I wanted to kill her. There was one story that could give insight without revealing who sent me or who I was... it would be vulnerable enough she might not mind the necessary censoring.

"Very well..." I paused again, as if hesitant to share, but eager to learn what trouble I had gotten myself into by hastily swearing an oath that was bound by magic rather than honor. "What if I were to tell you of another oath I took?"

"If you mean the Slayer's pledge, I have no use for it."

“No... not that.” I bit my lip, looking away as I solidified what would need to be censored, but playing as if I was still nervous.

“Does this oath affect me or why you’re here?”

“It does.”

“Very well. Let’s hear the tale.”

“I became the scapegoat to a person of considerable influence before coming here,” I said letting the familiar flare of hatred rise to the surface. “So much so that it jeopardized all that knew me. My training was no use against this person, and so when they made good on their threat, I was forced to make a deal with the only person who had enough power to reverse the wrongs done against me and the innocent. The effects of that oath are that I cannot sleep, not truly until my bargain is fulfilled.”

She bolted upright from the chaise, her own shadows flaring with uncharacteristic agitation. I sank deeper beneath the cloudy water as she wordlessly gaped at me. Her slender fingers were now bone white from the force of her clenching.

“You cannot dream?”

“No,” I said timidly, genuinely surprised by her visceral reaction to that news.

“You gave them up willingly?”

“Of course, they’re only dreams.”

She began to pace, more shadows gathering with each pivot to form a train of darkness, before snapping at me to rise from the bath. Shadows shot away from her before pausing to gently wrap around me as the bath drained.

She opened her mouth only to snap it closed again. She offered her hand to help me out of the tub which I took tentatively.

“Wha-“

“You’ve said enough, I’ll tell you the effects, but we need to put a salve on the scrapes... and find clothes.” She murmured to more shadows as we entered the bedroom which disappeared through the door. She motioned me to the wardrobe where she opened a drawer full of tins labeled in what I now knew to be fae. She removed the lid to reveal a clear salve. She extended the tin for me to take, gesturing to my wounds. I took the tin and began applying it to the scrapes on my waist and sides, the shadows sliding away just enough to expose the wounds at my touch. She nodded satisfied before pulling out another dress, this one a dark green silk. She went about altering it into what might have been a nightgown except for its purposefully tight cut and lack of sleeves.

“Is there a reason for such exposure, or are you purposefully removing modesty for your own gain?” I blurted, surprising myself, placing the tin down and wincing at the wounds in my back I’d been unable to reach.

“If you’re referencing the fit, you’ll not want loose material on those as they heal, as for the sleeves I think it accentuates your build. Don’t most warriors like to exhibit the result of their training?” She held out the garment, like it was intended as an honest gift rather than torture. I grabbed it and attempted to slide it on over the shadows only for the wounds on my back to twinge further.

“You’re bleeding again, may I?” She offered the salve.

I nodded, more intent on feeling the relief of the salve than trying to avoid her touch.

There was no pain emanating from her slender fingers. The salve was placed expertly as if the scent alone was enough for her to locate each scrape. I tried not to notice the gentle precision, instead focusing on the relief the salve provided. Once she was done, she held out the garment I’d dropped. I raised my arms, and she helped settle it with minimal pain. True to her word the fit and fabric did nothing to aggravate the wounds. Walking to the bed I sat on the edge before facing her again.

“So what does the oath do? Make me fall in love with you?”

She laughed humorlessly, “Nothing so dark Nettle. Forced mating is grounds for a flightless life or death on my lands.”

“Good,” That was all I could think to say. I was glad, relieved really to know that wasn’t something viewed with any flippancy. And yet, once again she had surprised me. What kind of monster was so concerned with morals? With choice? What caused such a change of heart since she’d cursed me?

“The oath was sworn on the star of truth. It means that so long as our bargain stands you will be unable to lie without pain.”

“What??” I asked, outraged, perhaps she wasn’t as concerned with choice as I thought.

“I was surprised you agreed so readily, but it’s the only way I would be willing to not use the dreadlings to confirm your word. Now it would seem you have a habit of rushing into bargains you do not understand.” It was stated matter-of-factly but I couldn’t help but take offense. I had had no choice, or... at least it had felt that way in both instances. Either way why was she so hung up on the idea of my previous bargain? Lack of dreams and sleep was a logical price for waking me and keeping me from what was meant to be eternal sleep.

“Yes well, perhaps you’ve never known desperation, Mistress,” I said, gesturing abruptly to the luxurious space.

She turned away rather than answer and I couldn’t help but feel as if I’d landed a blow of my own, though there was much less joy in it than I anticipated.

A knock came from the door, followed by a stream of shadows that joined the others still clothing her.

“Enter.” She spoke coldly.

The door opened to reveal her grinning Captain spinning his axe.

Twelve

“What is he doing here?” I asked, my hands itching for the weapons I no longer had.

He ignored me, his grin vanishing as he took in the Mistress’s frozen statue. He strode quickly to her side. Whatever he saw on her face had him taking her hand in his and placing a kiss on her hand before kneeling in front of her.

Her shoulders relaxed as she took in his submissive position.

“Are you certain?” She spoke softly, but loud enough for me to hear.

“I have nothing to be ashamed of Mistress,” He spoke, his head still bowed.

A bit of life leaked back into her at that. She placed her hand on his cheek before leaning forward to whisper something that had him turning red.

“Nettle, I need to feed and wish to do so in the comfort of my own bed. You have a choice, either give me your blood and leave to sleep on the chaise, or stay here for the full feeding, there is room enough for the three of us on the bed and the Captain doesn’t mind an audience.” I glanced between the two of them, the blush spreading with each flick of my eyes. She needed sex and blood; He’d provide one and I’d give the other. The question was, could I handle watching the act?

“The chaise is fine for tonight I think,” I said standing with my arm outstretched for her to take. She didn’t look away from the captain as she sank her teeth into my wrist. I bit my cheek to swallow the inappropriate noise that came unbidden from my chest. With each pull I felt the remaining discomfort from the day vanish, replaced by breathless need.

I hardly noticed when she released my wrist or attached the leash of shadows, rather I followed their pull, only coming out of the daze when the leash began wrapping around a previously unnoticed metal loop in the floor. I knelt to examine it closer, hopeful it led to some sort of escape hatch. Only to discover three more, all anchored firmly in the ground without sight of seam or hinge.

My confusion was interrupted by a long moan. I froze, realizing my inability to see them would not spare me the sounds of their coupling... or mating as Mara called it. I looked about for a blanket or pillow or anything I could use to muffle the sounds only to realize the large, gilded mirror in the corner gave me an uninterrupted view of the bed.

The Mistress was nowhere to be seen, but the Captain was kneeling in front of the footboard, his hands resting on the bed above while it looked like he ate the open air.

“That’s it baby, just like that.” The mistress’s voice accompanied the Captain’s hair wrapping itself around air and jerking backwards. The Captain moaned again louder before repositioning his head back to where it was, slurping loudly which elicited a moan from the impossibly invisible Mistress. The expected confusion over that revelation was drowned however, by another series of moans and wet lapping. I sat down on the chaise, eyes glued to the mirror as my nipples pebbled

against the thin silk. It was something about the sounds, knowing I could see them but they couldn't see me. I knew they didn't mind an audience, they'd already said as much, but from here I didn't have to worry about my own reactions. As the Captains hand traveled upward to trace her invisible curves, I felt my own hand traveling up to my own chest to mirror his actions, pretending for a moment that my skin was hers, and his hand was mine. It sent a delicious thrill through me, one that had me deciding to seize the day, after all who knew if I'd survive this. Maybe after I found some release, my mind would stay clearer around her.

Whether it was the lingering venom or the continued moans coming from the two of them, the sensation of my own hand tracing the uninjured skin of my chest through the silk felt like pure bliss. Turning off any part of me that might question this later I linked my movements with his. Synchronizing my own pleasure to the gasps and moans that filled my mind enhanced every touch. As his hands dipped down to join his mouth, I could have burst from the slightest brush of my own hands. I was so close, how had neither of them come yet?

A slap rang out, and I saw a long red welt join the scars on the Captains back. "I didn't say you could touch yourself, baby." The Captain groaned, placing his hands back on either side of where she must have been sitting.

"Forgive me Mistress." He spoke, his words strained.

"You will earn your forgiveness."

"Anything you want Mistress."

"That's right pet, anything I want. You are mine. Mine to pleasure, mine to use." The words that had disgusted me earlier now sent a thrill through me, I glanced at The Captain's back wondering if he felt the same.

"Please, use me, Mistress." He begged, his voice trembling with unmasked desire at the idea.

"I do love it when you beg. Very well, show me what a good toy you can be, if you do exactly as I say I'll consider letting you find your own release. Disobey me again and you'll be without release for a week."

"Yes Mistress." He spoke fervently as he took in what I could not see, what I was dying to see. I began circling my throbbing clit as I tried my best to imagine her naked form, her thick thighs and wide hips, imagine what it would be like to worship her as the Captain had, or better. The memory of her moans had me circling faster.

"Get on the bed. No touching." I removed my hand immediately before I remembered she wasn't talking to me. The Captain climbed up on all fours before facing the mirror. His eyes were glazed, and didn't seem to notice my attention as shadows gathered in front of him. They seemed to form some sort of harness, but rather than being placed onto him, they stayed hovering at the height of those same hips I'd just been picturing.

"I'm going to take my pleasure from your sweet tight hole, but because of your disobedience you may not feel nor see me, only my shadows. You are not to come unless I say, or I will punish you. Is that understood, pet?" I felt my own muscles tighten at her words, jealousy flooding that it wasn't my hole she was about to fill. That I wasn't the one she was calling pet, wait... hadn't she earlier? The Harness moved throughout the speech until it was behind him.

"Mmmmm." He said, staring into the mirror with a look that said he was halfway gone from pleasure. A slap had him rocking forward and his eyes rolling backwards.

"Yes Mistress, I understand."

Another slap, "What do you understand, baby?"

"You're going to find your pleasure with the shadows by filling me up."

"That's right, and if you're a good toy, I'll let you come too. Do you want that?"

"Yes Mistress." He whimpered. I felt like doing the same, so turned on by the view and the fantasy of her saying those words to me I was seconds from unraveling.

"Very good. Now stay still."

The harness sprouted a new shadow. The phallic shape was made visible as she slowly, teasingly traced it between his cheeks and up his back. He rocked backwards eagerly which earned him another slap.

"What did I say? Stay still." Her words were punctuated with further abuse that did nothing to lessen the flush on his face.

His arms wobbled as a bit of drool leaked from his mouth. Before he could close his mouth however, the Mistress had moved from behind him, to his side in a flash of speed, tapping his cheek with the phallic shadow. He willingly turned and bobbed his head, taking as much of it as he could into his mouth, gagging every so often but not stopping until the harness moved backwards.

"Fangs, baby." She ordered, and he willingly bared them. Bringing the shadow beneath his fangs he let the shadow tilt the fang until it was dripping with his own venom, perhaps ten times the amount released in a normal bite. The silvery sheen was unmistakable, yet my head was spinning as I tried to imagine the intense pleasure that much venom could illicit if just a few drops in my blood stream were enough to make me dizzy with it.

There was little to no warning before the harness was once again behind him, this time however he didn't need to rock back before the harness was flush against him. His guttural growl mixed with the mistress' praise. As they began rocking back and forth, I slid two fingers inside myself eagerly, curling them to hit the spot I liked best with each of her visible thrusts.

The pleasure went from dizzying to downright torturous as the thrusts came and came and came. Each was accompanied with a pair of sounds that went straight to my core.

"Mistress, please." He finally begged for us both. She spun him onto his back, revealing his large leaking cock, a dark red from the continued denial and stimulation. I'd never been particularly attracted to men, but I found myself wondering what this particular cock would feel like in place of my fingers. Slipping a third one inside I tried to stretch myself which resulted in pleasure so hot I found I had to lay down. Moving my head to the side I was just in time to see the harness straddling either side of his waist. We both groaned as his cock slowly became hidden from view, buried inside her. As she bobbed up and down I pretended for the first time I was her. Taking my pleasure from the shaking man beneath me. Allowing him to stretch me as I sunk onto him again and again. Faster and faster. Until the bed frame was shaking and she had to lash shadows onto his hands and feet to keep him perfectly splayed beneath her, perfectly helpless. She shouted her release, the shadows disappearing as she continued to ride him.

"Fill me up, baby. Don't hold back a drop." She commanded, and he made a sound halfway between joy and pain, his hands snapping to her waist as he pumped eagerly, so fast his hips blurred. Bringing my other hand to rub my clit as the other fingers continued curling and thrusting as I finally allowed myself to close my eyes. I was her, about to be filled. I was him, grabbing her waist and thrusting into her with wild reckless abandon. I was alight with the sensations as I switched between mindsets, enjoying both perspectives before falling off the edge that had been beckoning. We found our release together, his roar covering up the sounds I'd forgotten to repress. Hastily removing my hands from between my legs I sat up to wipe them on the chaise.

Just as I'd feared, not moments after I'd gotten the last of the moisture off of my hands a figure came into view. I held my breath as Roya came holding a tray of food, a pillow, and a blanket floating

on some shadows. I took it all hesitantly, unsure if I could truly conceal what just happened. Putting the tray beside me I waited for her to leave. Rather she pointed in the direction of the lavatory. I slowly moved the tray to cover the wetness I'd left behind before backing toward the stall to keep the wet silk behind me. Hopefully she had no sense of smell, and this was just a courtesy the mistress ordered before her sex and she had only just come to deliver now they were done.

I returned to Roya holding out the blanket which she insisted on wrapping around me, then she did a little wave and collapsed into a ball before rolling through the wall. Eating the food slowly I refused to think about what I'd just done, choosing for once to bury myself under the blanket and slip quickly into the void that was my rest. Sinking deeper than ever before to escape the racing thoughts and fears that hovered at the surface. For tonight I wasn't an assassin or a princess, I was simply a human with needs, and for tonight that had to be enough.

Thirteen

I woke up wet and gasping. Launching myself from the Chaise I forgot I was leashed. As my leash pulled taut I was yanked back, slipping on the wet floor. The soaked blanket wrapped further around my legs and I felt flat on the hard floor, any remaining breath knocked completely out of me. Rolling to my back with a groan I found a pair of dark eyes looking down on me. It was Captain Ravensford, holding an empty bucket. The glaze of pleasure I'd seen last had well and truly faded, replaced with a mischievous twinkle that reminded me briefly of Celia.

"What... was... that for?" I managed to get out, gasping like a landed fish.

"Your smell was distracting, and we didn't have time for a bath." He said matter-of-factly.

"Why wouldn't I have time for a bath? Am I going somewhere?" I asked, nervous that it was him instead of... her, speaking to me. Hadn't he asked her to give me to him as a gift when I arrived? Had she decided that was more effective now the dreadlings were off the table?

"The Mistress has been called away, and after our fun last night I agreed that I'd take good care of you." He said with a sly grin.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said with a stutter. Had they seen me? Or... Oh my god he could still smell the arousal.

"It's not often we find someone so compatible with our idea of a good time. Maybe we can keep you around after you spill your secrets." He said walking a few paces back to grab and swing a sack back and forth at me. I shimmied out of the blanket trying to maintain what was left of my dignity, which was made more difficult by the soaked silk of my nightdress, leaving nothing to the imagination.

"It was just the venom... and the stress of the day. It didn't mean anything." I muttered darkly, torn between getting into a fighting stance and getting back under the blanket to hide from his hungry gaze. What happened to the meek mouse from last night?

"Who said sex had to mean anything to be enjoyable?" He said with a raised brow.

"It wasn't sex on my end, and it won't happen again either way." I said through chattering teeth.

"Right. Well I have an offer to make. Since you seem so fond of bargains little slayer, or do you prefer Nettle? Either way, do you want to spend the day here tied to the bed with Roya again... or do you want to come train with me?" He flashed his fangs with a wide grin that screamed insanity. The safe answer would be to stay away from him, him and his Mistress. But I needed to see the layout of this place to escape, I needed to stay fit, and I needed to see if I could help the humans they had trapped here. I felt each responsibility fall back onto my shoulders like plates of ill-fitting armor, clumsy and heavy.

"That's not so much a bargain as a choice. What do you get out of my training with you? Aren't

you worried about my learning something dangerous?" I spoke slowly, allowing my annoyance through as if my decision hadn't already been made. I paced at the restlessness that was building with each moment I spent burying the weightless person I was last night and resurrecting who I was made to be. Slayer Rose.

"I'm not that worried, but I am very bored," he sounded like Roya, "And that's enough to tip the scales in your favor." He said with a smile, like I would be overjoyed that he found the idea of my being dangerous hilarious. "I've been told you're pretty fast for a human and I'd like to see for myself. If you impress me maybe I'll even willingly teach you a trick or two." He watched my pacing as if it was a poor indicator of the rumor.

"You'll let me out of this place... because you want to see me run?" I said slowly, pacing faster as if considering the idea and trying to impress him. Looking at the sack he was still swaying I tried to find the outline of my weapons, "I'm assuming I'm not allowed to kill any vampires we train with?" I said disappointedly, as if that alone was enough to dissuade me.

"You assume incorrectly." He said with a smirk.

"What?"

"I'll be the only vampire you train with as of now, and I'm dying to see your best." He said with a wink. "So, what do you say? You wanna try to kill me, Nettle?"

"More than anything," I said with a smile.

"That's the spirit!" He said with a smirk, tossing me the bag and walking out of the bathroom. "Tell me when you're changed! Or should I watch through the mirror?" He laughed, throwing a blanket over the offensive item to show he wasn't serious.

I scowled, ripping the sack open to my leathers and boots freshly oiled, and another sack made of clothes that perfectly mimicked my original outfit though they smelled suspiciously of jasmine. Putting them on quickly I tried to ignore the scent mixing with the lingering memories of my arousal, as I finished off the last tie I threw the memory behind a locked door. It had never happened.

"Captain? I'm Ready." I called out.

"Excellent!" His stomping gait carried him back into view. With a whistle the leash jumped into his hands. "Now, after last night why don't you call me Ravensford?" He said before stepping closer. "Also, I'm supposed to blindfold you Nettle. Don't want you learning too much about where you are and all that. But, since we've already gotten to know so much about each other how's about we lose the leash and you can hold onto my arm? Friendly like?" He held out his arm as if he was about to escort me to the dance floor rather than a training area where he'd given me permission to kill him.

"Friends that want to kill each other?" I asked sarcastically.

"The best kind." He said back.

"Fine, Ravensford," I sounded out the name dramatically, "Just don't walk me into a wall or I'll bust your balls before I stake your heart."

"Careful with those threats there Nettle, or I might just fall in love." He said fluttering his lashes.

I laughed before remembering who he was. Who I was. Looking away I took his arm, and the shadows rearranged with another whistle into a perfect blindfold.

Fourteen

The blindfold was removed to show an empty courtyard just past dusk. I looked at the last fleeting rays of sun with delight, turning to see Ravensford standing in the shade, no apparent fear at the near sunlight. Was he immune?

He turned my attention to the racks of weapons lining the courtyard, winking in the light of the large fire pits. He must have seen my confusion at the open flame because he wagged his eyebrows before saying, “Fear of fire is something we try to eradicate in our recruits.”

Seemed an odd thing to focus on, but then I shouldn’t be surprised by the man who had the fashion sense of a crow. I’d noticed that fire was used throughout the castle as a means of lighting, odd, as it was one of the few ways to kill vampires. Though the flames were small and contained in glass orbs... was that what he was referencing, or was there another reason they needed to diminish a fear that ensured survival? Could it be that the creature from before really was a dragon?

“Right!” He walked in front of me gesturing again to the racks of weapons. “Pick your poison, Nettle.”

“I thought you wanted to see my speed?” I asked, trying not to drool at the unexpected turn of events.

“I do, but you can’t kill me without a weapon or twenty. I’d hardly expect you to run me to death.” He chuckled at his own joke gesturing to the weapons again.

I walked closer to a rack of axes; all were older but well sharpened and polished. “Who do your recruits think Nettle is meant to be? You let many bloods slaves out to play soldier?” I asked, looking toward the tall stone walls as if the other humans might be hiding in an alcove just out of my line of sight.

He turned, grabbing a two-handed long sword from the rack closest to him before tossing it toward me like it was just a stick.

I caught it, of course, but still, very ungentlemanly.

“You’re a soldier, I train soldiers. Don’t make it complicated.” He shrugged, examining the sword he’d chosen for himself.

“And the collar?” I asked, gesturing to the bit of shadow around my neck. The leash had disappeared, but it was still obvious.

“It’s just a bit of Jewelry love, some people would be jealous if they knew the Mistress put it on you.” He winked playfully, but I saw a flash of something else in his eyes. I wondered if that bit of knowledge was first-hand. I imagined how a collar would play into what I saw the night before and felt dizzy at the idea of him being pulled about willingly on a leash. Fuck. Why wouldn’t these images stay buried?

Rather than trust my words, I traded the sword for an axe and waited for him to turn around before racing forward, weapon lowered with the blade facing out to protect me. But right before I could land a blow. He was gone, moving just as fast as her. Much faster than anything had a right to be.

Tutting he pointed severely at me, “Nettle, I told you I wanted to see your speed, not feel it. Now, start again.” He jumped backwards which gave me more room to charge him.

I obliged, going as fast as I could, fast enough the world around me faded, but before I could so much as breathe on him he was behind me.

“Hmmm.” He said, as if he wasn’t sure my performance was measuring up to his expectations.

“As if you were ever this fast before you were turned.” I scoffed, annoyed by the impossible comparison.

“You want to bet?” He looked serious, as if he could prove something long since passed.

“Why, you have some way of transporting us 500 years back?” I rolled my eyes, the idea ridiculous.

“Rude of you to assume my age Nettle, but no I have something better.” He pulled out a ring of dark grey stone, my eyes widened, it was the same material as my sword. He slid it onto his finger and waggled it at me. So, it didn’t always kill their kind, interesting.

“What will that do?” I asked, honestly curious despite knowing a little about the material.

“It dampens my Vampiric nature, so little human assassins with mighty high opinions of themselves can’t accuse me of cheating when I kick their ass.”

“If what you’re saying is true, and that’s not just a poorly made ring of rock then I dare you to try Mr. Brick wall, you won’t be able to catch me even if you had another century to try.” I snap.

“You made an oath of truth didn’t you? Your mark will tell you when someone nearby is lying.” He stated simply as if that was common knowledge and not something mind-blowing.

“Truly?” I ask, glancing at my thumb with wonder.

“No.” He said, and I felt a prick of heat warm the mark.

I laughed, delighted that while I couldn’t lie to the Mistress, I would know implicitly if anyone was lying to me.

“Yes, well as fascinating as our little gadgets are how about we see if you can catch and kill normal me little slayer.” He whispered the last word into my ear, having approached without sound. I swung with the axe, but he was gone.

Spinning the weapon in my hand I shouted out, “Might as well squawk. Cause you’re dead Mr. Crow,” before sliding into my fighting stance.

His guttural laugh echoed around the courtyard. “Let’s feel that sting, Ms. Nettle or I will have to demote you to...” He paused before grinning, “Dandelion.” He said, walking forward to pick up the sword he’d left in the dirt.

I rushed toward him again, and again. Landing blow after blow with no result. We were evenly matched so long as I stayed quick, and didn’t allow him to use his superior strength. It was exhilarating, something I’d only been able to find with the Slayer Masters. I found myself laughing as we began what felt like a dangerous game of tag only with the blows of our weapons.

Rushing him again I readied another blow. He pivoted, and I followed, perfectly able to keep him in view. He raised the sword, and I extended the axe to block his blow. The pressure rang through my arms with the force of hitting a stone wall, similar to Master Jericho’s strength but not much more. As he pivoted again to land a blow beyond my guard, I ducked under the swing, this time letting my axe slice his leg as I moved closer rather than further away. First blood.

He reached down, trying to grab me by the scruff like a stray kitten and I yearned for my silver

spikes as his hand brushed my bare neck. Knocking his hand away with the butt of the axe I sprung away, rolling into a crouch with the axe pointed his direction.

"No touching, Crow. Or should I call you Nestling, now I've drawn first blood?" I taunted, hoping to find something that would crack the confidence and give me an opening.

"Oh Nettle, first you make me bleed and then you give me a Nickname? You want me to fall in love with you, don't you?" He approached slowly, swinging his sword as he circled confidently. "I already have a Dom but maybe she'd let you share..." He circled closer, and I continued to spin, ready to catch his blade. "Maybe that's what she wants." He lunged, crossing our weapons. He pressed forward, making use of his weight until his face was inches from mine. "Maybe that's why she had you watch," he whispered.

My legs gave out, realizing for the first time that my inability to see her had no bearing on her ability to see me. To see the effect of what she did and said to Ravensford had on me. He made no move to land a killing blow, instead cocking his head as he peered down at me kneeling in the dirt.

"She saw?" I croaked, my throat tightening with embarrassment. I had planned to get close to her and sleep with her if need be. But I hadn't planned this, hadn't expected to be vulnerable or honest with my arousal in that way.

"Everything. I thought you might catch on when she started calling me pet. But then, you don't know my usual pet name is Baby, maybe it'll be Nestling too, someday... if you earn our trust."

Fangs out, Baby. She'd said when talking directly to him. Pet... it was meant for me. For us. And, despite my protesting earlier about that exact name... I liked it. I hated it again now. But what did that mean?

"And how am I meant to earn your trust?" I ask, my voice cracking with thirst and emotion.

"I'll tell it to you straight Nettle, I don't have any shame in admitting we're fighting a losing war. Have been for close to two centuries, and we're tired. Our people are tired, our recruits are waning, and we need anything that might give us an advantage."

"A war against who? The humans?" I ask, wondering whether he would reveal their enemies, or purpose. Roya's warning about not all vampires being my enemy came to mind. Had she been trying to convert me to their cause?

"Did your employer tell you nothing of the person you were asked to kill?" His head was cocked again, looking at me with confusion.

"I wasn't given much choice in the matter." I disclosed slowly, deciding that was vague enough to cover the bargain and the curse.

"So you don't actually want to kill her?" He clarifies.

I stay silent, I want to kill the monster that cursed me. I need to bring her ashes to the God that will set my people free. But... did I want to kill her? She'd done nothing since I'd arrived that painted her as the monster I'd believed her to be, and yet it had to be her. There was no doubt in anyone's mind who had cursed me, who was responsible for the sin and misery of our land.

"Come with me, Nettle. We can keep trying to kill each other later." I took his offered hand, the feel of his matching calluses soothing me. As if at that moment we were simply rival warriors, nothing more. His whistle and the resulting blindfold reminded me of the truth, he tucked my hand into the crook of his arm before leading me back inside. I lost track of the number of turns we took before the castle's musky scent slowly gave way to the unmistakable scent of fresh bread and... Salves? The air here was pungent with herbs in addition to being filled by the cacophony voices punctuated by the clang of pots and pans.

The blindfold was removed to show me the unmistakable view of happy, healthy, humans.

Fifteen

“Why would you bring me here?” I ask, remembering they had alluded to my being sent to where the other humans were as a punishment.

“My reasons are my own, go ask them your questions. Let your mark tell you what is true.” He shooed me away in favor of leaning against the door frame, taking a Goblet from one of the attendants who had spotted his hulking frame. An attendant offered me what looked to be a simple sandwich, which I took eagerly. Scarfing down the simple meal while I let my eyes sweep the room.

It could have been the dark mirror of our own kitchens. Dark flagstones blended in with the dark stone of the wall, to the left was a large hood extending beyond a hearth large enough to fit a grand fire and three cauldrons. All three cauldrons manned by a figure blurred by a cloud of steam. The center of the room sported a long wooden table filled with men and women of all sizes and colors laughing and cutting herbs into baskets that were being carried by small children to an alcove in the far wall. A slender woman with ebony skin and grey striped hair was sorting them into clay jars and placing them on the long shelves already bowing from the weight of their wares. Besides the chimney the door we’d entered was the only exit, so he was still taking precautions, wise of him. Clinging to the edge of the room I made my way to the woman bottling herbs, noting the chatting continued while eyes followed my position, as if I were the danger rather than their captivity or jailer that was sipping blood in the corner.

“Forgive me lady but may I ask you some questions?” I asked meekly, hoping humility would inspire openness.

“If you’re here for answers, go question the Cauldron Keepers, so long as the steam doesn’t dissuade you. Now shoo, you’re intimidating my helpers.” I looked back to see the children hanging several feet back from me, whispering and pointing at my sheared head. Though whether it was the unnatural color or the cut that concerned them I couldn’t tell.

The chimney may well have been clogged as under the hood was curtained by steam. Entering felt like walking into a thermal pool, my eyes stung with the pungent concoction I recognized from the night before. Each figure zeroed in on my entry, their heads raising to show their identical features, their hands still stirring in sync. Chills raced down my back despite the heat as I saw each of their eyes were a milky blue. In their robes I could not say if they were man or woman, only that they were all eerily identical, ageless, and blind.

“Ask your questions, daughter of thorns.” They spoke in unison.

“I wish to know if the humans are being kept here against their will, if they need saving,” I said with as much confidence as I could muster with my eyes tearing up from the steam. Had they gone blind doing this?

"While not their home, still yet their haven. To leave is death for all. Even you, sleepless one."

They spoke.

"Why would they die? Are they under threat?" I ask, swallowing the need to ask about what they called me.

"We're all under threat, in his war. Humanity is all but forgotten, following now the fate of the Fae."

"The Fate of the Fae, so it's not a myth? Why is humanity affected by the Mistress' war?" I ask, soaked now by sweat and steam.

"A myth they are not, a myth we now fight. The Mistress our only light in the night."

"Can you speak plainly? I just wish to help you, to set you free." I wheeze, dying to leave.

"You do have that power, daughter of thorns. But only when you see rightly and settle your score. Reveal the deceiver, reclaim what is lost, find your true power before it is dust."

The steam parted as a hand gripped my arm, pulling me out of the steam-smothered hood. I struggled weakly, unable to see. But relaxed when my hand was placed in the familiar crook of an arm. I didn't need blindfolding, my eyes continued to stream as we turned down countless identical dark halls. I didn't see the door open before familiar splashes of purple entered my blurring vision.

"You took her to the Cauldron Keepers?" The Mistress's voice called out.

"I did, she had questions." He said flippantly as he led me to the bed. A slender pair of hands gripped my chin, tilting my head up until I could see the dark silhouette of her. Her hair and dark twisted horns were framed by the faint outline of her wings. None of it was clear, only color and shadow visible to me now. Had that been the price of my vague answers? To go blind like them? I began to laugh, tears still freely falling from my eyes. When would I learn to ask the price before demanding the answer?

"I wonder the same, Nettle. Now hold still." I did as she said, unsure of what she was about to do, but trusting that to disobey would be worse. A dribble of warm liquid hit my cheek, and I instinctually made to look at what had caused it, forgetting my blindness. Her hand gripped my cheek, and the liquid continued across my eyes, turning my vision red. I blinked rapidly and tried to shake off her grip, my mind convinced the red was our own end. When her grip did not falter, and more blood followed I squeezed my eyes closed against it.

"She's a stubborn weed I'll give her that." Ravensford's voice came from nearby. "Tell me Nettle, have you already grown so fond of your blindness you'd refuse the remedy simply to spite the source?" He chuckled, and the sound loosened the grip of my panic. Remedy? I slowly opened my eyes to allow more blood in and found my vision had already grown, I could now see the shape of the Mistress's lips, pursed in thought or perhaps frustration. I blinked against more blood, there was the gold of her eyes. Another blink, the flaming orbs above her horns. A final blink, the Captain wagging his fingers from the corner of the room.

I tried to lunge past the mistress only for her to grab and keep me easily at arms length. I leaned around her to point a finger at the Captain.

"You asshole! Why didn't you warn me?? You made me believe you were trying to help me, just to sabotage me!"

"Sabotage you? I never told you to go under that hood, you could have asked anyone in that room how they got there and they would have told you. Instead you go straight for the herbalist and she thinks you want your fortune told! Honestly, how was I supposed to know you'd land yourself into the only bit of trouble to be found?"

I let my breath come in heaps, certain the next breath will have the perfect comeback to hurl at

him, but instead I feel more and more sheepish. It had felt like the clear answer, like the only path forward. Were my instincts so backwards that I couldn't count on them to do anything but lead me to my own detriment again and again? I looked up at the Mistress's Gold eyes and found only quiet contemplation. Why wasn't she angry?

"Why do you keep helping me?" I all but shouted, annoyed by the continued disconnect between who I thought she'd be and who she was.

"I already told you." She said, calmly again. "Because you're mine."

"I don't know what that means! Because I'm your prisoner? Your pet to play with? Because I don't want to be any of those things." I spat out, angry and ashamed by the tumult of emotions in my chest. But as the last sentence left my mouth, the mark on my thumb burned like it had been stabbed by a hot poker.

"I told you Nettle, you cannot lie to me. You can lie to everyone else including yourself, but not to me." She picked up my thumb and planted a kiss on it. I pulled my hand back and turned. Pacing to the other side of the room, relishing the lack of leash in that moment. Perhaps she knew that I couldn't bear that in my fragile state, perhaps she cared, or perhaps she didn't want me dipping into madness before telling her what I knew.

"I don't understand. Why don't you hate me? I came here to kill you. I want to kill you." Another flare. "I need to kill you." I amended, but the mark was still.

"So did the Captain. And most of my advisors, I try not to hold it against them," she says with a shrug. I glanced at him in shock and he sent a wink my way.

"Well I think the Nettle's mind is seconds away from meltdown, what do you say we take things down a notch? Maybe bring up some food? Freshen up? Make an evening out of former enemies becoming something... else." He amended when I shot him a look that said he better not say what I thought he might.

"That sounds like an excellent idea baby, why don't you fetch everything while I get Nettle cleaned up? Nettle, will you be sleeping on the chaise again or would you like to join us on the bed?" Mara turned those golden eyes on me then, her face carefully neutral as if she knew if she revealed her preference, I was certain to choose the other out of spite and desperate need for control.

"The view is better from the bed if you ask me." The Captain called, still hanging by the door as if he too was eager to hear my answer.

"You two deserve each other, you're both impossible." I mutter, rubbing my newly healed eyes.

They shared a long look, so long it felt as if they were having a silent conversation only communicated by the subtle changes in their expressions.

"Are you two going to keep your hands to yourself?" I finally managed, looking at the floor, to avoid showing the longing I had for the soft bed after today's strenuous training and revelations. As I stared at the floor I tried to craft a blank expression to hide my discomfort of witnessing something I longed to join. I just couldn't seem to craft a way to join that would work purely in my favor.

"Doubtful." They said in unison. Grinning at each other again.

"Fine. I can't take sleeping on that chair again. Just... don't expect me to join in... and try to keep it down." I mutter, fleeing to the bathing chamber at their joined laughter since my collar remained untethered. Seeing myself in the mirror was a shock rather than the grime of training all that was left of the days events was the Mistress's dried blood leaving what could have been dark red tear tracks down both of my flushed cheeks. If I was already flushed and I still owed her a feeding... how was I going to survive tonight?

Sixteen

She made me bathe in the grain soup again, smothering me in a salve that was now permanently etched in my mind as belonging to three cloaked figures whose words echoed in my mind.

While not their home, still yet their haven.

To leave is death for all, even you sleepless one.

We're all under threat, in his war.

Humanity is all but forgotten, following now the fate of the fae.

A myth they are not, a myth we now fight.

The Mistress our only light in the night.

You do have that power, daughter of thorns.

But only when you see rightly.

Reveal the deceiver, reclaim what is lost.

Find your true power before it is dust.

“What do you think the prophecy means?” Mara spoke, handing me a new nightgown like her knowing what the prophecy said wasn’t a complete surprise.

“Was I speaking out loud again?” I blurt out while slipping on the dark blue fabric.

“No.” She said, changing the shadows into a sort of dress that plunged down to expose most of her chest and barely brushed the top of her thighs.

“But you know what it says?” I gulped, trying to stay on track.

“Oh yes, I keep a dreadling near the cauldrons to document any questions asked or answers given, it’s been an invaluable resource,” She spoke with passion before her brows creased, “though I doubt the keepers will tolerate it once they’re safe enough to leave the keep,” she trailed off looking at me.

“Would you say the dreadling dissuades them from speaking poorly of you?” I ask, hoping that perhaps that was the loophole to explain the joy and comfort I saw in the kitchens, or the disturbingly positive title they’d given her.

“Oh of course not, altering a prophecy would cause the keeper to lose their gift. It’s a mantle that is very particular about its hosts.” Her tone was gentle if firm, as if she knew what I was hoping to be true. That perhaps the monster I’d expected from her, and had hated my whole life was only hiding, and would make itself known at any moment.

The mark did not burn, and I was left where I started. Was I to believe she was humanity’s last hope? If she was, I could not slay her, despite the ramifications of breaking my oath. Would she raise the curse on my people? Or... and this was the hardest to admit, would she help me find the true monster that had cursed them? Because the more I learned about her, the harder it was to believe she was responsible at all. But my God had visited me. How could I deny that?

“I can feel your heavy heart.” She said gently, so caring it felt like the final assault against me, like she knew I was cornered by the overwhelming evidence of my own ignorance and was set on seeing my plans in ashes, the way I had originally hoped to see her.

“No” I spoke adamantly, raising my arms in what might have been a request to stop, or a weak plea for mercy.

“No?” She asked.

“I’m not doing this with you,” I said, walking away until I could stare at the mirror that showed no sign of her reflection on the bed.

“Not doing what exactly?” She spoke, moving the curtain as if to see me better while also signaling she was still there even if I refused to see her.

“I’m not talking about my emotions with you,” I say clearly, looking instead at my own reflection, the dark blue nightdress highlighting the blush of my cheekbones.

“You seem upset by the idea, why is that?” She said thoughtfully, and I spun around to retort.

“Because you... ohhhh you’re good. I see what you’re trying to do and it won’t work!” I had the odd impulse to stomp my foot like a child, perhaps I was losing my sanity along with my confidence.

“Why?” she said leaning against the bed frame with a challenging smirk that made me see red.

“Because I’m tired!” I said, spinning around to avoid the rising need to close the distance between us.

“Tired of what?” she exclaimed as if the idea of my being tired was preposterous. It boiled my blood.

“Of you! And all your...” I shouted, gesturing wildly at the mirror as if it could capture her impossibly confusing and frustrating presence.

“Did I do something to upset you?” she asked quietly.

“No! And it’s pissing me off!!” I yelled back, not caring if it made sense or not.

“So... just to be sure I understand, you’re angry because I haven’t made you angry?” She said, a touch of amusement coloring her tone.

“Yes! No! I just... Could you quit it with the mind games for two minutes??” I was close to screaming now.

“I’m the one playing mind games?”

“Obviously!”

“How? By offering you shelter? Food? Clothes? Companionship? By caring for your wounds, giving you space? Letting you train when you ask? Agreeing to bargains that will allow you the ability to know a truth from a lie? Or was it when I healed your foolish, self-inflicted blindness?” She spoke, raising her voice with each debt of kindness I was trying to forget.

“Yes! But no... it’s...” I stumbled, unsure if she was upset and finding the idea made my words harder to grasp.

“Or was it when I made you come so hard you saw stars without even touching you?” Her tone made something in me snap. The words pouring out came straight from my subconscious without any filter at all.

“It’s everything! You’re my worst nightmare come to life!” I screamed, tears falling down my face in anger and embarrassment.

“In what way? Is it that you can’t see past my horns and wings? You can’t bear to see kindness come from a creature like me?” She jumped off the bed and paced toward me.

“Of course not!” I said and stood my ground.

“Why then? Why am I your Nightmare?” she demanded.

“Because you’re nothing like you’re supposed to be!”

“And how was I supposed to be? Easy to kill?!”

“You were supposed to be a monster!”

Her horns and wings sprouted, and she bore her fangs, “Is this not monster enough for you?”

“No! It’s not!” I grabbed my throat which was now hoarse from the tears and emotion. “I wish it was, but it isn’t,” I whispered.

“Why do you sound defeated?” she said, reaching for me. I took a step further, not sure I could handle being touched by her at that moment.

“Because you were meant to be heartless, easy to hate, my undeniable enemy and you’re none of those things.” I continued looking down at my feet.

“Are you telling me you don’t hate me?” she asked, her own voice sounding husky with emotion now.

“I don’t. I wish I could... but I can’t.” I admitted. It was perhaps the greatest understatement I could make, but it was all I could admit to right now.

“I know exactly what you mean.” She said softly, making no further move to touch me.

“Stop. Please. Just... stop being nice to me. I don’t deserve it.” I plead, my voice cracking at the end.

“You think that’s why I’m nice to you? Because you deserve it?”

“I used to think it was part of a plan, but now it just feels cruel, like you know you’re tearing me apart with it.” I admit again.

“Oh, Nettle. Can you think of no other reason I might want to give you nice things other than to manipulate you?” Her voice is full of pity, and I hate that I can think of no response to refute it. So, I stay silent.

“I’m going to tell you something, but I relieve you from your obligation to answer it with an equal truth. I want you to know I mean this, there is no ulterior motive other than I think you need to know it.”

She waits for me to nod before continuing.

“I have been fighting this war for decades, read hundreds if not thousands of minds and yet I have never felt any so selfless and compassionate as yours. I may not know fully who you are but I do know this; if you gave even a fraction of the love and sacrifice, you give to those you care for, you would be unstoppable. It is only your reluctance to embrace your own power that keeps you feeling powerless.” She spoke with such certainty, and it stirred something in me, some forgotten untouched part of my soul.

“I don’t know how to do that” I admitted softly. I had never been one to find solutions or make plans. I was a soldier, best at following commands and leading others to do the same. Yet now, with my God nowhere to be found, I was left with a command that would put the people I loved most in jeopardy. Despite the thousands of eyewitnesses, and the word of my God, I was struggling to believe she was the cause or solution to the curse. If only she was the villain I’d believed her to be, this would be easy. My confidence would still be intact, her ashes would be in my satchel, and I would feel none of these troubling emotions that were dividing me in two.

“Fear not fair maidens, refreshment and entertainment have arrived!” Ravensford boomed as he reappeared. Silver tray in hand, filled with a variety of fruit, cheese and cured meats as well as a glass of what looked to be a very expensive vintage.

“Thank you, Baby” Mara said, returning to the bed and patting the spot next to her. He slid the tray closer, before beginning to strip. I looked away, striding to the end of the bed where I could focus on

the tray instead. Stuffing my face with the cheese and meat, I threw etiquette out the door. I'd not eaten near enough for the physical and mental strain of the day, and as it was all meant for me either way. I felt no guilt as I put the bulk of it in my mouth. Swallowing the last of it with a sigh I poured myself a full glass of wine before chugging that down too. Perhaps that would soothe my aching soul. Leaning back against the frame I closed my eyes to pretend I was back in my own tower. The person on the bed was simply Celia, about to challenge me to a game of cards while telling me the latest gossip of the court. I would smile and pretend I felt nothing but the type of love she had for me, all the while soaking in every scrap of attention she'd send my way. It wasn't perfect, but it was comfortable. Predictable. Everything that this situation was not.

"So Nettle, shall we make good on your bargain? I'm feeling quite parched." Mara said with an audible smack of her lips. Her teasing tone was a welcome distraction from the heaviness from earlier.

"For blood or more answers?" I asked, closing my eyes again while holding out my arm for her to take.

"Both of course, I strongly dislike being made to choose between two things I love equally." She said, grinning against my wrist before sinking her teeth into the tender flesh there. It should have hurt; it should have felt like a betrayal of self or an act of violence. But it was the opposite. I loved it. I loved the feel of her lips and breath skittering across my arm. Loved the groans she emitted with each pull, the liquid bliss of her venom emptying into my being. Loved the high of feeling my constant tension leaving my muscles and my mind shutting off to enjoy what my instincts were screaming at me to believe and indulge. I was panting shallowly by the time she pulled away, desperate to do something, anything that would satisfy the pleasure that already hummed through me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw The Captain had left, and it was only Mara kneeling on the bed beside me. Mara. It was such a beautiful name, it seemed to call to me like an answer to a question I'd never fully formed. Why did that cause me pain? I took in her shadow-soaked form, her skin almost glowing in the flicker of the orbs. She looked like the Moon, soft and bright, gold and silver, framed by her hair and shadows that were both the soothing black of night.

Light splashing from the bathing chamber registered slowly as the Captain's new location. But it couldn't quite break the spell of my need this time. Perhaps it was the venom, or the wine, or the release of emotions. But it felt as if I was starting to see her clearer already, like the Keepers said, she was a light in the night, and she'd just newly restored my sight. Or maybe, it was the vulnerable need present in the Mistress's gaze that had me believing that this was more than venom and she felt the impossible draw as well.

"Nettle?" She whispered, her voice husky from emotion or feeding.

"Yes?" I barely dared to breathe, worried that I'd break the spell and plunge myself back into doubt.

"A truth for a truth?" She whispered, licking a bit of blood that lingered on her lips.

"Okay, you go first," I say, unsure of what I'd admit beyond the annoyance at my growing need for her, and the headaches they caused.

"I know you want me, and I want you too," she admitted. I stopped breathing, waiting for the mark to burn, but it didn't.

"I do want you, but I..." I cut off, broken. It wasn't supposed to be like this, I was supposed to make her fall for me without feeling anything. Instead she was irresistible. And despite our recent argument she wanted me just as much as I impossibly wanted her.

"Let me help you, please." She pleaded reaching toward me, as if she could sense my desperation

to find comfort, or maybe just release.

"I don't... I haven't ever, I can't..." I stumble backwards away from the bed frame, unsure whether I'm trying to convey my lack of experience or my inability to commit to this.

"It's okay little slayer, let me take care of you. No bargains or bonds needed. Just for tonight. Let me show you what it feels like to be taken care of, to be pampered like the pet I know you want to be." She said, bending forward off the bed so she was in the position I'd seen the Captain in the night before, but wanting me. Maybe it was just physical, maybe I could get her out of my system if I still needed to move forward, but what if crossing this line made it all the harder to know what was true?

"Just for tonight" I repeated, tasting the freedom those words offered before looking up at her in surprise.

When I hesitated, she sent a leash to attach to my collar. My eyebrows rose, but I didn't protest as she reeled me in slowly. It woke the fire from the night before, and I couldn't help but enjoy seeing my own ramping desire reflected in her face. I tried to mimic her moves as I crawled onto the bed. Once I was close enough, she jerked the leash until I was kneeling with her, our bodies inches apart. I breathed heavily, wondering if she would be commanding me the way she had Ravensford, or if she was waiting for me to make the first move and prove I wanted this. Our breaths mixed as we stared at each other, our pupils dilated so only the smallest ring of color remained.

"If at any point you want me to stop, just say so and I will." She breathed, her eyes darting to my lips as I licked them the way I'd seen her do so many times before.

"Yes, Mistress." I hummed.

She pounced then, crushing her mouth into mine before pushing me onto my back. She attached my leash as she had many times before but this time my body responded with pure want. She made no move to touch me for what might have been the longest moment in history, instead she let her gaze admire me.

"You look so good tied to my bed, pet." She said huskily. I reached for her in desperation and she lashed that hand in shadow as well, stretching it up and to the side before lashing it as well. I pulled instinctively at the bond and found it gave no slack, though it felt completely comfortable. My nipples pebbled as arousal followed a completely different type of helplessness. Mara took in the sight with a smile that was all animal.

"Do you like being tied up after all?" She asked bringing her thumb to her fang until the venom gathering there began to drip off.

"Yes Mistress." I groaned, yearning to know what her venom would feel like on my skin.

"Are you going to be a good little slut and stay still for me? Or should I tie the rest of you up now?" She grinned, and a bit of her blood began to join the venom as it began dripping onto my night dress. I squirmed, bringing the hem of the dress higher in anticipation. I'd read enough explicit books to be excited by the degradation, finding it exhilarating instead of insulting. I wanted her to use me, to pleasure me, to make me feel.

"Understood." She said, the rest of my limbs splaying out while she lowered her blood and venom-coated hand to trace my thighs. As they lit up with increased sensation, I groaned my disappointment when her hands stayed just south of where I wanted them most.

"Don't be greedy, if tonight is all I get I want to learn every inch of you." Her hands dropped on either side of my head as she leaned down to suck my ear lobe into her mouth, biting softly and tugging further when I gasped.

Her mouth was criminally cruel as she made good on that promise. She alternated between sucking and soft nips of my neck and ears. Her hands traced swirls around each mark she made, never

going lower than the neckline of the nightdress, although the tiny straps had long since fallen off my shoulders from her thorough attention. I arched uselessly in search of friction, but the bonds didn't give, which had me twisting my hands in the sheets in frustration.

"Please, Mistress." I moan, the increased pleasure of denial driving me mad.

"Use your words." She whispered, her breath tickling my neck in yet another tease.

"Touch me. Taste me. I can't... I can't take it any more." No sooner than the words were out of my mouth she had moved between my legs, her head hovering above my measly chest. As she began to slide off the garment I suddenly felt self-conscious. Would she mock my body? Remind me I was barely a woman? She seemed to recognize my hesitation and paused just as the garment exposed one of my sensitive nipples.

"Do you wish to stop?" her breath now sent goosebumps skittering across my chest, my nipples screaming with the first hint of sensation they'd been longing for.

"No!" I groan trying to hide my face by looking to the side.

"Why are you ashamed? You've been reacting so beautifully for me, is this not what you want?" She moved up to straddle either side of my waist before tipping my face to look at her.

"It is. It is all that I want, all I can think of when you're near. I just... I am certain you will be disappointed by my lack of womanly... form." I finish lamely, uncertain why it matters when this is meant to be purely physical and yet unable to separate the fear from this situation. I wanted her to want me, to crave me, the way I did her. The way she did Ravensford.

"I assure you, I'm enjoying myself little slayer. Your desire is like a star freckled feast." She spoke sincerely, and the mark did not burn. I felt tears gather at the gift of knowing when truth was being spoken around me. I nodded eagerly, allowing her to discard the rest of the garment which passed through the shadows without issue and moaning as she descended.

Her head was obscuring my view of her actions, something that would have made me nervous if I wasn't hyper-aware of the sensations she was causing with her every breath. One of her slender hands was pressed into the small of my back, pulling me closer. Her mouth slowly descended my chest.

I gasped as the air brushed my taut nipples only to moan as she took one into her cool and wet mouth. Tangling my fingers into her thick, soft hair I pulled her closer to me, hungry for the heightened pleasure she was wringing with each flick and swirl of her tongue. Her soft hand continued to pinch and pull at my other nipple mercilessly and my hips bucked of their own accord. Her mouth left my chest with a pop and she smiled at the moan of disappointment.

"It sounds as if the Captain is finished with his bath. Would you mind if he were to join us on the bed?" I looked at her, nervous she would compare the two of us, want him more or expect him to join us. I wasn't sure I was ready for that.

"He'll not touch you unless you agree." She stated, the distinction clear that he would be there to touch her. She began tracing my sides in what was a surprisingly calming manner. I realized that right now I felt no jealousy, only a curious understanding. I had no intention or experience in reciprocating what she was offering me, and by allowing him to join us would mean she would find her release as well. I wanted that. I wanted to hear the sounds she'd made last night. I wanted to see what he did to elicit them so I could replicate or improve upon them. I nodded eagerly, trying to prop myself up to see better and forgetting my bonds. She smiled dazzlingly, before calling out for him to join us but to keep his hands on her, and threatened punishment if she caught him touching himself or me.

He strode toward us, naked and dripping from the bath, his cock already jutting out in front of him. He stopped at the foot of the bed awaiting instruction. She scooted closer, allowing him to grip either

side of her generous waist before nodding her permission for him to start. I watched his face disappear between her thighs before she let out a sigh of appreciation. I looked between them then, the jealousy reappearing with a vengeance.

"You want to know what he's doing to me don't you? You want to know how it feels to be devoured?" She murmured, her pupils fully dilated as she licked her lips.

"Yes, Mistress," I murmur, unsure how she knew but not caring if it meant she'd show me.

"Then let me do what your hands attempted last night, I will give you everything I get. Let you feel everything I feel. And then after I've wrung every last drop of pleasure from your lips, we'll see what other kinds of fun we have in store. After all, none of us truly need sleep."

My legs were weak by the mere idea, and it must have shown on my face. But I made no audible sign of agreement, wondering how long I'd be able to last.

Ravensford elicited a sound of wrath from his mistress as his head rose from between her thighs. "I dare you. First of us to cry mercy owes the other two a truth." The Mistress went from looking like she was seconds from slapping him to giddy with excitement.

"What do you say?" she asked gleefully. I looked between their wicked mouths curled into twin grins and cursed. I had already come this far, and there was no way I'd be able to watch them again without saying or doing something reckless.

"I'll take that bet," I said, collapsing against the pillows Mara had brought forward with her shadows. Ravensford disappeared from view and Mara's mouth hovered between my thighs. I looked down to see her golden gaze waiting for mine before her tongue closed the gap between us.

The next few hours were unparalleled bliss. The sensations she wrung from me with finger and tongue brought me to the edge far more times than I could count. When she finally allowed Ravensford to bury himself inside her, she summoned the harness and waited with her venom-soaked shadows in front of me.

She released me from the bonds to make me beg, which I did gladly, and could have burst from the perfection of the stretch alone. But as Ravensford's movements synced with hers, the venom began its work. I was nearly gone, gritting my teeth out of stubbornness alone. I pictured wiping the smug look off of both their faces as a way of fighting off my inevitable end. It was a relief when I heard the undeniable shout of Mara finishing, her own gasps and twitching bringing me inches away from the end.

I bit my lip so hard it began to bleed to clear my mind. Whether it was the scent of my blood or Mara's pleasure, the Captain roared his finish as well. Crying mercy before withdrawing from behind us. Mara's slender finger reached forward to slide between my lip and teeth. She pressed harder onto the wound as her breasts brushed my back and I gasped as the pain began to mingle with the pleasure that was now etched into my very being. Once her finger was coated in red she brought it back, dipping between my thighs to rub wet perfect circles above where her shadows were still buried. As she began rocking back and forth in time with the circles, I felt my breathing quicken. I looked to the side only to find the Captain had gone to bring the Mirror where I could see the harness entering me perfectly from the side. My face was flushed, and my green eyes just as glazed by pleasure, but this time I could feel Mara's every touch. Her thighs against mine as her long hair tickled the curve of my back. The circles and rocking sped up, her hand nearly vibrating with her speed and I was lost. The bright bursting behind my eyelids took my vision as I came harder than I had ever dreamed possible. It was an earth-shattering kind of pleasure, one that felt like it might never end. It was so perfectly edged with pain that kept me securely in what might have been the most mind melting moment before collapsing next to Ravensford on the bed.

I made no fuss when I was picked up and carried to the lavatory. Nor when I was cleaned with a damp cloth that smelled of Jasmine. I could barely open my eyes as the cool cloth and additional salve helped settle my fevered and sensitive skin. When I was finally tucked back into the bed, I barely could keep my eyes open before falling deep into the dreamless void of sleep. The soft tender, indiscernible words of praise fell with me like a rain of soft, star-shaped petals to soften the darkness.

Seventeen

I woke to murmuring, soft comfortable conversation that settled deep in my bones, like a second heartbeat. I didn't know what it meant, if it meant anything other than I felt completely changed by it, this sense of belonging that I most certainly did not deserve.

"Are you certain?" he whispered.

"It's Drago's favorite trick, and he's not branched out much the last two centuries." She spoke confidently. I didn't recognize the name, but curiosity heightened my mind, waking me up further.

"Perhaps she's mistaken, maybe she still dreams and is unaware of them? It isn't uncommon for humans." He insisted. They were talking of my bargain, and they thought it was with a man named Drago?

"I don't think so, it would explain what I saw of her mind. He is the only one capable of stealing dreams and is capable of hiding things from the dreadlings. Not to mention it would explain why she's the first Slayer seen in over 100 years." She stated firmly. So the Sun God had hidden the memories that might reveal my identity? Or our bargain? Despite my growing confusion about my feelings toward what I knew and what I felt, I was certain in my gratitude those truths were my own to reveal. It had given me leverage and allowed me to bargain if nothing else. The last thing had to be false though, there was no way I'd been asleep 100 years, but my mark stayed silent.

"I believe you, of course. I still don't think you should do anything rash. He's been planning this for a long time. We should take a step back and come up with a better plan." He seemed pleading now, concerned by whatever plan he was referencing that I seemed to have missed.

"You're right." She admitted, and I felt the bed move as one of them changed positions.

"Promise me, not as the Captain of your guard, but as your devoted servant, you won't act before we find a better way, together." He insisted, concern straining his voice.

"I swear I won't act rashly, and I look forward to hearing all your ideas, Baby. Just don't stay buried in your books too long," she murmured. I couldn't help but notice the wording of her promise. Perhaps he did too as he squeezed her closer, accepting his lack of control with much more grace than I could ever hope to.

I stretched then, as if I had only just woken up. My muscles somehow revitalized rather than wrecked by the activities of the night before. My face flushed as I saw Ravensford's and Mara's faces peering down at me.

"Sleep well, Nettle?" Ravensford asked with a wicked grin. Mara slapped his chest.

"Leave her be." She snapped, looking at me with concern. Why would she be so worried about me? It had only been physical, hadn't it?

"Just because we promised it was only physical doesn't mean I can't worry about the emotional

impact. Last night was a lot for someone that's... well anyone that isn't used to our kind of practice. I simply want to be sure you're not sore or feeling upset." She responded. I must have spoken out loud.

"Yes Nettle, you still are." She spoke, scooting closer to cup my cheek in what was definitely concern mixed with something else I couldn't quite name.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep. I missed the game." I state, wondering if that's what had her looking at me so differently.

"Not to worry Nettle, I already gave my truth to Mara. I'll see about telling you one when we're alone." He spoke cheerily, easily hiding the concern that I'd heard from him earlier.

"Oh... are we going to train again?" I asked, propping myself onto my elbow as the excitement of sparring against someone of similar skill took hold. The heightened angle gave me an unobstructed view of his wide chest, the v of his waist disappearing underneath the satin covers that did little to hide the outline of what lay below. After feeling Mara's fingers and shadows I couldn't help but wonder how he might compare. What it might feel like to ride him while Mara rode his tongue, our own mouths and hands-free to explore each other.

It was an odd experience, as I'd never felt drawn to a man in that way, and yet he'd somehow become perfectly tangled in the pleasure and attraction I felt toward Mara that I could no longer imagine having one without the other. Perhaps because in many ways they were already one. I began to understand Mara's comment from the other day a little better. Though I still strongly preferred her, I did enjoy his dares and jokes, and having experienced all he'd done through Mara, I couldn't help but appreciate his skill yet again.

"Actually, Roya brought word that someone has issued you a challenge," Ravensford said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"A challenge? For what?" I ask, confused by the idea that someone cared enough to challenge someone being kept as some form of prisoner.

"You don't have to indulge them Nettle, they've nursed a heightened sense of importance, and are using a loophole to issue the challenge in the first place." Mara spoke, her annoyance at the idea clear.

"Who is it? And what could they possibly want from me?" I asked, looking between the two of them. It was the Captain who spoke.

"Her name is Jessa, and she's issued a fight to the death." He said as if the idea thrilled him. Perhaps he was keen to see me dead, less willing to share Mara than he let on before.

"What did I do that she wants me dead?" I asked, still confused.

"You killed the man she claims was her mate on your journey here. She's the one that I allowed to take your hair, in hopes it would settle her. They never mated so far as we knew, but it would seem the braid is no longer enough. She wants your head as well." Mara's face was grave despite the obvious tone of annoyance at this turn of events.

"You can reject the challenge since you're still a prisoner, though apparently word of our training and the Keeper's prophecy is spreading. I think she wants to claim the fame you've already begun amassing for herself." He spoke, rising from the bed to start dressing in the clean new clothes that had been laid out, as if he was certain of my response before I was.

"And you think I should take the challenge." I point out, it not really being a question.

"Definitely," he said with a wolfish grin.

"Because you're bored? Or because you want me dead?" I ask, ignoring Mara's wince, and the questions it raised.

"My boredom is a terrible thing, you have the right of it Nettle. But if I told you who I thought

would win, it might change the outcome. So tell me, do you want to beat this imposter to reclaim the braid you apparently mourned? Or hide behind that collar you claim to hate?" He offered my freshly oiled leathers on an outstretched hand..

"It's not like I can just reattach it once I have it again. Or do one of you have some other power I'm unaware of?" I hedged, the idea of my braid's return a fantasy I couldn't indulge in only to be disappointed.

"Our herbalist has the skill to restore certain things that have been stolen, though it is limited to smaller items. It is definitely possible." The Captain said, tossing my boots at me one by one, followed by a sack of clothes. All of them aimed purposely at my head.

"Fine, if you're done trying to break my nose then send my acceptance." I peeled the covers back and began to dress as the Captain whooped before rushing back out the door.

"You sure about this Nettle?" Mara asked softly.

"Of course, I might not be able to beat you or Ravensford, but I'm a vampire slayer. It's my job to bring justice to those that would abuse their strength to terrorize the weak." I spoke calmly, refusing to ask if it was a fight she thought I would win. He was right, for whatever reason knowing their opinion felt like it could skew my confidence.

"Alright, then you'd better win. You'd better win so we can finally trade truths and maybe if there's one worth hearing I'll remove that collar." She spoke as if it wasn't an impossible idea to be trusted with my freedom and her trust so soon, with so little offered in return.

"You can't mean that," I argued, fumbling the tunics ties in shock. I'd not given an oath, or shown any confidence in following her. It had been a pathetic show of doubt, more doubt than I'd ever admitted to feeling in my life.

She stood, her shadows falling off of her figure to leave her bare as she approached. It felt like a trick, like a final distraction before she did something to injure me in some way. Instead of stabbing me in the back, or telling me she'd never set me free she bent down. Taking the ties in her hands and lacing them slowly, gently.

"I mean it." The mark stayed cool. She really did. But how? What could I have done to change her mind? Her fingers strayed upwards to trace the collar fondly.

"Unless of course you'd like to keep it on? I have to admit I do love the way it looks on your slender neck. But then, if you did keep it on, I'd want it to mean something else." She looked at me with heat in her gaze.

"What else could it mean except I'm your prisoner?" I asked, my heart racing at her nearness, or at the idea of freedom, rather.

"It could mean you've given yourself to me? That you accept you're mine, and that you claim me in return." She spoke the words full of hope, as if they meant something I couldn't quite grasp. I shook my head, confused about how that was different from being her prisoner.

"I can't. I just... I can't." I said, uncertain how I'd bring myself to kill her but still certain I'd do what was needed to save my people. But maybe... maybe if I had my freedom I could find another way. I could justify the growing need to protect and care for the person in front of me, even if it made my stomach drop and my head spin to admit it.

"I understand." She said stepping back, my leathers and clothes all perfectly in place thanks to her. She kept her face perfectly blank again as she said, "Just don't die, you have your freedom to look forward to. And you're too valuable... by which I mean we might need to sell you yet Slayer." She laughed flatly, walking away as the shadows gathered again to clothe her.

Just then Ravensford reappeared, bursting through the door like an over eager puppy.

“The Challenge is on!”

Eighteen

Jessa's long red hair fell down her leathers like liquid flame. Behind her were thirty vampires of varied ages. Most of them were in hose and tunics, and a few in breeches. They entered the ground tentatively, all looking at her. She nodded to the Captain before signaling the others to ring the courtyard. As she turned, however, I saw a familiar flash of silver in her belt. My braid. Not just my braid, but the thorns as well, still intertwined and set into the dark leather handle of a whip.

Ravensford entered the center of the Yard, hands outstretched as if to gather the attention of those still gathering to watch.

"Lieutenant Jessa has issued an unprecedeted death match to the Mistress' captive, Nettle. Nettle has accepted the challenge, despite the protection offered her by the Mistress, as is her right. The rules are simple, the loser is the first to die or cry mercy. If you cry mercy, your opponent has the right to offer you terms on which you must agree to under oath or die by their hand. Are the terms heard and accepted?" He roared, egging on the crowd that now held humans and vampires alike. All, I noted, were intermingled without fear or distaste. Another tally in Mara's favor.

"I accept these terms!" Jessa shouted, pricking her finger on a fang and letting a drop of her blood mix with the ground. The squeaking of bats transformed to human shouts as vampires flew in to join the crowd.

"And you Nettle?" Ravensford turned to me, chest heaving as if he too were experiencing the adrenaline coursing through me.

"I would accept but have no fang or weapon to draw my blood. Is she too cowardly to fight an equally armed warrior? Or was her hope to find a cowering captive unable to fight, except with feeble human fists?" I yell out, matching the crowds energy.

"I could destroy you no matter your weapon, human!... Or should I say, Slayer?!" The crowd divided then, some falling silent with shock while the others shouted their outrage.

Jessa was taking no chances for me to walk away alive, trying to turn the crowd in her favor. It was a simple enough strategy, one I'd been desensitized to by training in full view of men that couldn't believe a woman would be able to best them. It was predictable, and comfortable, so I had no issue calling Jessa's bluff.

"Captain, if Jessa has no fear of me then I would request the return of my sword. It seems only fair we should both fight with the weapons we are most familiar with. Although, if she would rather admit she is under-equipped to fight me with my preferred blade I'd say it would be equal if we both are armed by the general armory."

"This seems like a fair request Jessa, what say you? Shall we fetch the Slayer's sword? Or will you admit your fear?" The Captain belted.

"I feel nothing but rage! Crave nothing but vengeance!" Jessa spoke, the burn of my mark confirming the fear in her darting eyes.

"Bring forward the Slayer's sword then!" The Captain boomed.

The crowd parted slowly, a hush spreading as everyone caught a glimpse of the large wings and twisted horns that heralded The Mistress' arrival. When she made it to the center of the yard everyone bowed their head once in reverence, a few mouthing words of gratitude in her direction. She nodded her acceptance before summoning a cloud of shadows through which my sword dropped into her awaiting hands.

"Before I allow this match to continue I have a few words for you all. While I recognize Jessa's right to issue this challenge, and Nettle's right to accept, I would like to remind you all what has brought us here. We are the only thing stopping Drago's brutal push Northward. We can afford no division, no matter the match's end. Slayer Rose, I will allow you to reclaim this weapon but only if you vow that you will use it for the sole purpose of bringing justice against those who would use their strength to terrorize the weak. Will you agree?"

I recognized the words I'd spoken not an hour before, and as I looked around I saw the crowd's unity for what it really was, the solidarity and camaraderie of a shared purpose. A fellowship of humans and vampires against this man Drago. Looking back at Mara, I thought her gaze carried a plea, one so clear I could almost hear the ghost of her voice enter my mind.

I'll not ask you to betray yourself, only don't hurt my people.

I knew this might be the best offer I could expect. I stepped closer, kneeling at her feet while holding out my hand for her to draw blood from. Her lips whispered something against my palm before her fang sank into the flesh of my finger. There she allowed two drops of blood to drop into the sand before sealing the wound closed with a lick.

My sword fell into my hands as she launched herself up into the cloud of shadows and disappeared. A blur to my right had me rolling forward, unsheathing my sword at the end of my roll to see Jessa was done with waiting, the whip resting in the spot I'd just vacated.

The crowd applauded and shouted their approval at what must have looked to be a fully rehearsed spectacle, and I couldn't help but smile as I saw Jessa's eyes glowing red. This was going to be fun.

Neither of us had blinked, and as I kept twirling my sword, she raised the whips handle. I knew better than to look at it, could picture how the moonlight would flash down it, instead keeping my green gaze fixed on her red one. When my braid came down with a crack I lunged.

My blade, aimed for her throat diverted last minute to cut through the straps of her weapons belt instead, while my braid whipped through empty air yet again. Thudding against the ground at the same time as her belt which dropped pathetically around her. Interesting, so I couldn't kill her. At least... not until I proved she was a traitor, or deserved justice. I heaved a sigh of annoyance as I noticed her eyes were the only part of her to follow my movements which meant she had none of the superior speed that the Captain or the Mistress had shown. This also meant that this could have been over quite quickly if it weren't for the bargain. So, it looked like I needed to think of some questions.

I spun out of range again, raising my sword to rest on my shoulder while she scrambled to unsheathe her dagger before kicking the now useless belt away. She held the dagger horizontally in an attempt to shield her heart while raising the whip to use again. Turning, to keep me in view.

"Jessa, I'm afraid we've wasted all these good people's time by calling them here for a fight your decades away from winning" I yelled, trying to match Ravensford's taunting charm. It must have fallen short though as I didn't hear his booming laugh above the taunts and boos of the crowd.

"I'll not be insulted by a Slayer that kills the very vampires trying to protect the humans their

order abandoned!" Jessa cried, earning shouts of agreement from the sidelines. So, it would seem The Mistress was telling the truth in that matter as well. It was a fair enough point, though I could hardly defend the slayers that had fallen to my curse without throwing myself further into harms way. How could I end this if I couldn't kill her with my sword, and couldn't think of a question that might expose her as deserving that death?

"Why not shut me up then? Bring this Slayer to her knees!" I challenged, my swords position still signaling my disbelief she could land a hit. Take the bait, I pleaded.

"Why try? I heard you got on them willingly enough last night! This Filthy Slayer has wormed her way into favor by spreading her legs so she can spread her lies. She is no savior like this false prophecy states! Only another of Drago's spies come to destroy us!" She shouted.

She struck quickly but predictably, giving me no time to process her words before trying to whip my sword hand. I shifted so it would wrap around the blade and pulled. She released the handle rather than be pulled closer with only a dagger to defend herself. As she and the crowd delved further into a heated frenzy, I began to understand what Mara feared. I could now kill her with the whip, but it would not save either of us from the scrutiny of the crowd, or their thirst for a more attainable target in their fear of this Drago.

I unwrapped the whip carefully to prevent any of the hairs from being damaged further. Tucking the whip into my belt I spun to the side, lowering my blade to stop the stone aimed at me from hitting the person behind me. I made eye contact with the vampire, trying to communicate my good will before continuing my pacing the yard.

"I'm sorry, I was under the impression this death match was regarding my killing your mate in self-defense. Not to fling accusations at the people who have sworn to protect you. The question is now, did you even care for the person you claim as your mate? Or are they a convenient stepping stone to stage your coup and seize power?" I ask turning to look at the thirty vampires she'd brought with her. They all shifted, as if nervous by the accusation. This was why Ravensford looked giddy, he knew I could defeat her, but he also knew Mara would be able to draw me into a bargain that would cause me to hesitate unless she was deserving of the final blow.

Jessa licked her lips as she looked at the crowd that had fallen silent at the idea of mutiny. I didn't have to know Drago or the strength of his forces to know civil war was the end of any rebellion. Mara knew it too, wanted me to see it with my own eyes that she was everything I didn't believe her to be. She was a leader that inspired love and respect rather than fear and for whatever reason was protecting vampires and humans alike. She knew she could offer me my freedom as a reward for this fight because she had already foreseen that I'd either be smitten enough with her to accept her collar and claim her as my own or demand my sword and agree to a contingency that would help me see her people the way I viewed my own. I lowered my sword, speaking to the crowd as I'd seen my Master's speak to the Slayers.

"I came here thinking you and every vampire were my enemies, believing wrongly that I knew all there was to know about your Mistress and this keep. My time here has shown me there is no reason for me to bear any of you ill will, and I apologize for the part I played in taking down your fellow compatriots. I no longer wish to be your enemy, but rather join you. If your purpose truly is to protect humanity, that is. I know nothing of prophecies or the fight you find yourself in, but it is my hope that I might atone for their lives not through dying in this ring, but by helping you reclaim what has been lost. The same I way I hope to help my fallen Slayers. What say you Jessa? Shall we call off this challenge and work together?"

I extended my hand to her, waiting with bated breath for her next move.

Jessa's eyes began to glow, surrendering completely to her nature, perhaps out of confidence they would ensure her survival.

"You already sound like her with your pretty promises you have no way of keeping." She growled, dropping to all fours like an animal about to pounce. I made no attempt to move as she leaped toward me. Stepping to the side at the last moment I grabbed her long red hair and yanked backwards while extending a foot that sent her stumbling to the ground. She let her dagger drop in an attempt to soften her fall and I kicked it further while holding my sword to her hair.

"You might not know this about my sword, but all it takes is a single cut for a vampire to turn to ash. I haven't tried it on hair before, so maybe it won't work. Maybe I'll just repay the insult before I send you to whatever afterlife will take a coward." I bring the sword closer to her hair but rather than stop or plead mercy she bares her fangs.

"I am no coward, you whore." She snarled, more concerned for her reputation than her life it would seem.

"Then why take my braid while I slept? Why not demand a challenge then? Why wait until a prophecy is made about me unless it's only power and influence that drive you?" I ask, again loud enough for others to witness.

She went limp in my hold, as if accepting her defeat before beckoning me in closer. I obliged, wondering if she wished to plead mercy and make our terms in secret.

"The Sun God is displeased with you, bring him The Mistress's ashes by the new moon or your kingdom will never wake." She hissed in my ear. My grip on her hair faltered, and she lunged to cut her arm on my blade, smiling wickedly before dissolving to ash.

Nineteen

I looked up at the crowd, unable to hide the shock of her last words and willing death. How did she know about my God when not even Mara or the dreadlings could find a trace of him, unless she had seen him? If it was that, why would he commune with a vampire, about our bargain no less, when he claimed they were his enemy, and how? My usual visits from him during my nightly meditation had not occurred once since I'd been here. Did he know I had slept with Mara? Did he question my allegiance? Would he make good on that threat, or...

Ravensford was slowly making his way toward me through the crowd. Had he heard, would he have answers?

"Nettle! Nettle can you hear me?" Ravensford was kneeling above me, shaking my arm with far too much of his strength.

"Stop shaking me, or I'm going to be sick" I mumbled, as my swirling thoughts reacted to his jerky movements. He stepped back, sending the people gathered away with words I couldn't process.

"Can you walk? Or can I carry you without upsetting your stomach?" He muttered.

I tried to stand only to black out. Had I forgotten to breathe? I woke to him carrying me through the halls. They were clearly marked, and I wasn't sure if I was more surprised by the fact I wasn't blindfolded or that he was taking me into a room other than Mara's.

The place was smaller or made to look that way by the large towers of books that covered every surface except the mussed maroon covers of his much smaller bed. He placed me in a nest of crimson that smelled like his scent of parchment and rain before striding off to examine the books. Taking care to keep the towers in place he grabbed a couple of ancient tomes from the base of one before tossing them next to me. He repeated the process until the bed was covered in what looked to be a mix of history and fiction books.

Before I could ask what he was doing there was a knock at his door.

"Who is it?" He shouted, half bent over with his finger jabbed in the middle of two books, obviously annoyed at being interrupted.

"The Herbalist, sir. The Mistress sent for me." Her voice rang out, just as exasperated as the day before in the kitchens.

"Come in then!" He said, returning to his muttering while she entered with haste, winding through the stacks with all the grace of repeated practice. My eyes narrowed, wondering how she could have gotten so familiar with his bedroom. Had they been involved as well? Did Mara know? Was she part of their relationship as well?

The edges of my vision began growing darker until a strong slap stopped my spiraling. Taking a deep breath, I looked up to see the Herbalist frowning down at me.

“She should have sent you to me sooner.” She gripped, pulling out a pouch that opened up to reveal several rows of vials marked with curling script.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, fumbling for my sword only to find the whip. Looking up, I realized it was sheathed on The Captain’s back, next to his axe.

“Yes yes, we’ll look at restoring the braid next. But first I need you to swallow this.” She offered up a thick purple syrup that smelled strongly of berries.

“Caaaptaaain?” I slurred, unsure whether this was some latent attempt at poisoning, or whether I should do as she said.

“Drink the syrup, Nettle. If we’re right, it’ll help rid you of your headaches. If we’re wrong, it’ll taste like an earthy berry.” He yelled back.

I took a deep breath, before taking the vial and downed the contents like I’d seen some do with strong spirits.

“Good. Now don’t panic. I’m going to work on the braid spell, you might come in and out but that’s totally normal. Just remember, use your mark to see what’s true.”

The bedroom faded around me until I was in my dream space, the smell of parchment and rain offering me a bit of comfort in the bright void.

His golden hair came into view first, and as the rest of him materialized in a shimmering wave, I wondered at the clarity of his presence. Had I slipped into my dream state, or was I actually dying this time? His usually stern gaze was full of concern. He knelt near me, his cinnamon scent enveloping me in a strong embrace.

“Your Holiness?” I ask, uncertain now whether the words spoken at the arena were true.

“Princess Brenlyn, I had thought you lost! Why is it that you look close to death?” My mark burned, and I gasped. His hand reached to tilt my chin up into his sky-blue eyes. “Tell me lady, where are you hurt? Allow me to heal you.” The words were so similar to the day he’d found me in my Tower, offering me release from sleep and answers for the curse, in exchange for my dreams.

Just as then he summoned a chalice of dark liquid and bade me drink. I opened my mouth to say I was well when he placed the chalice to my lips. The thick liquid was cloyingly sweet, and I gagged as he continued to tip the substance down my throat. I struggled against the metal for a moment before he realized I was struggling to breathe and removed the cup. Heaving, I leaned forward, unsure if I was searching for air or about to up heave whatever he’d just given me. Perhaps before my capture I would not have questioned his rough handling, but after having my choices so respected, and my body handled with such care by those meant to be my enemies, I could not help the anger that bubbled to the surface in response. Whatever was in that drink was causing me great pain, something I had not noticed the first time.

“Why do you look so upset? Is my help unwanted now?” He said, his hand rising to clutch his chest as if wounded.

The anger in me faded at the thought of hurting him, certain now the only source of pain in my life was to betray my benevolent God. I trusted him implicitly. He’d rescued me and needed me to bring him the ashes of my current captor. I knew without a doubt that whatever was in that cup would help me. He rubbed circles into my back and my muscles slowly loosened. Pain retreated, and I looked down to injuries I did not recall sustaining slowly knit together.

“What... is happening?” I asked slowly, too slowly, was I in shock?

“A miracle of course, just don’t go dying on me alright?” His smile brought out the dimple in his chin and I felt a wave of his Godly aura. It filled me with certainty that he was my friend, that I was safe with him, and I wished more than anything to be seen as useful to him. To win my freedom once

and for all.

“I’ll not fail you, I swear it.” I moved to stand and his arm wound around me for support. I was honored for his help, but simultaneously ashamed of needing it. “I’m sorry I haven’t been able to bring you Mistress Mara’s ashes yet. I have a plan though.”

“And what is this plan?” He asked with a kindly smile, directing me toward some unknown destination in the bright dreamscape.

“Well, with your blessing I believe that I could... get close to her, earn her trust.” I felt strange saying it out loud, perhaps because I was constantly fighting the persistent draw to her already, enough so it felt like a lie. I looked down, focusing on the strength I could feel building with each step.

“Physically or emotionally?” He asked not unkindly.

“I believe she might be more open to the physical nature of things, given her magic. I don’t know if I could become emotionally close to the person who cursed and captured me. But I believe I could perhaps get close enough to her for her to drop her guard?” I looked up at him, wondering if he’d sanction the idea that I’d already technically gotten underway. Did Jessa mention that already, would he judge me harshly for it since I had been unable to communicate it to him first? Still, I felt I needed his approval, craved it so that I felt as if his contemplative silence was designed to punish my haste. Should I confess that I was not as objective as my plans wording make it seem? No, he might yet decide to make good on the message Jessa made if he did not think me contrite.

“I believe you are right Princess. You have my blessing, get as close to her as you can, however you can. So long as her ashes are in my hands before the New Moon I’m certain your curse will be broken, and our bargain fulfilled.” My hand stung for a reason I could not remember, and I shook it out wondering if it was the after-effects of whatever potion he’d used to heal me. He took my hands in both of his large palms, his eyes growing bright with what must be the physical manifestation of his blessing before he gestured in front of us at some unseen boundary.

“You must get back now, you’ll find your body is healed but you must not reveal how. I won’t be able to do this again, so take care of yourself and remember...”

“Don’t die.” I finished, ignoring the continued burning with a peaceful smile. Nodding my understanding before gathering my courage and stepping over the threshold. As the white space rushed away from me I felt a sort of settling in my chest. The doubt from my own feelings, and my experiences disappeared. Everything was as it should be.

Twenty

I woke to a bucket being held beneath my head, full of dark liquid. Before I had a chance to ask what it was, I began vomiting more of the substance out, shadows separating from the vile substance before wrapping around Mara's feet.

"You should have sent for me sooner Mistress." The Herbalist tутted again, rubbing the same soothing circles I thought I'd gotten from my God.

"Yes, I know. I did not realize she would be so deeply affected by his magic. I thought he had only had access to her for a few days or so." She murmured, kneeling in front of me. My vision blurred at her sudden movement, or perhaps it was the shadows leaking from us both.

"What did you give to me?" I slurred, looking for the Captain. "I thought it was just something to clear my mind?" my voice sounded weak, where was the confidence I'd thought I'd felt before?

"Nettle, it is I swear. It is only blackthorn syrup, I've used it and other herbs in the past on Ravensford and my advisors to clear them of Drago's blood and influence. But you've not stopped vomiting for hours. I didn't expect you to have so much and it's taking a toll on your body. If you give me permission, I can enter your mind with a Dreadling. We can siphon the rest to speed up the process." Drago's blood? My stomach clenched with the same pain as in the vision, had it been real then too? My eyes began to close, and I started to sweat profusely.

"Nettle! Stay with me! You cannot sleep yet; I am bound by our oath. I cannot help you unless you give your permission. Please! Just let me help you!" Those words again, yet this time they made me want to cry. Why did she look so concerned? I vomited more darkness, and a bit of fear started to leak through the fog. I couldn't die. Everything else was still murky, but I knew that much.

"I can't die, Mistress. I made oaths. I promised I wouldn't die." I mutter, clutching her hands.

"I won't let you die, Nettle. I'll do everything I can to save you, do you agree?" She came closer, her gold eyes half filled with tears shaking me awake until I could nod my agreement, the question already half-forgotten before my eyes closed again, this time to relive some of my favorite memories, bathed in sunshine.

I was training with my masters, gambling with Celia, earning my sword, receiving my thorns, earning my slayer's mark, my official declaration as heir swearing to avenge the curse placed on us by The Mistress, my first successful mission, my last name-day party, going in for a kiss... the sharp sting of rejection. The light faded, my joy was gone.

Now was the day of the bargain. I'd awoken to the curse in full effect, everyone had fallen mid-task. Our God had appeared and explained that he was only able to lift the effects on me for a moment. That I would fall once more unless I were to offer my dreams freely, which would leave me free to take vengeance. Bring him the Mistress' ashes by the new moon and my people would be free,

the curse lifted. He handed me the same Chalice of dark liquid we used for sacrament, promising the deal would be done once I drank. So I drank, and he vanished. Wishing me good fortune and reminding me to meet him back there on the new moon with the ashes. The memories of his visits since then blurred until my most recent, when I'd drunk again. It paused there, and again each time my mark had burned at a lie before I was sent back to the place where there was nothing but pain.

Roya was passed out across the foot of Ravensford's bed, The Fall of the Fae clutched underneath her overly large arms. I had no memory of when she had arrived but it didn't matter as I turned and heaved into a waiting bucket. The liquid was a mix of black and red, and as I spat out the last remaining drops, I felt my mind clearing slowly, just as they'd promised. I laughed, looking at the mixture again, it was almost pretty if in a sad way, like a wilting rose. Looking up to ask Ravensford what had happened to make me vomit, I realized he and the herbalist were both gone. Odd, when had they left? Did I imagine something of Mara being here too? I wished she were here. The thought caught me off guard. I began to go through our encounters as if for the first time to decide when I began to feel that way. At the moment I'd always felt torn by her kindness, frustrated by her lack of cruelty, but now it felt simpler, no longer tainted by...

"I've used it in the past on The Captain and my advisors to clear them of Drago's blood and influence."

"I didn't expect you to have so much."

My God and Drago were the same. The Chalice, the bargain. The dream, yes. But before that, years of Sacrament. Had the entire religion been a lie? Or had he snuck in later, using it as a way of bending us to his will?

"A Slayer? I thought your kind extinct."

How long had I been asleep? Had we truly slept through the last centennial? It would fit the fact there were people from all walks of life here. Explain my lack of knowledge in a war that had apparently been going on for decades. Had Drago even been the one to wake me? My hands were burning in the vision, he had lied. He could lie and did multiple times. What else was a lie?

"I'll do everything I can to save you, do you agree?"

She'd seen it. Everything. Knew all my secrets, knew who I was, and had not killed me. Had not cursed me again. Did that mean I was free? Did I want to be? I remembered her offer to stay, to keep the collar and be hers and claim her in return. I touched the skin of my neck, unsure of what I wanted to find. I let out a sob when I couldn't find the silky band of shadows.

Perhaps she no longer wanted me. I had fulfilled my purpose; she knew what she needed and now I was free to leave. Hadn't that been our original bargain? I stood, pausing in shock when I felt the weight and sway of my braid behind me once more. Grabbing the end I stared at the silver-white strands in shock. With the thorns still woven in their usual plait, I could almost pretend it had never been taken in the first place. Pretend I had not changed at all. Perhaps that's what I would do.

I eyed the door, and then the sleeping dreadling. I had a choice to make. I could leave... maybe dive into our own archives on the curse and find another solution. The Mistress had her information, and I had no remaining reason to kill her. The proof of her involvement in my curse or being its solution now completely in question. I had another week at least before the new moon, although I had no idea if that was even significant to the curse either. From what I'd gathered Drago was no friend of humanity. Perhaps he had already sent vampires or his beast to turn or burn all that remained. My heart seized at that, my feet carrying me to the door with a burning need to check and be sure everyone was still alive. But what if they weren't? I'd be walking right into a trap.

And then there was the second path. I could stay. I could make good on my promise in the

courtyard. I could help Mara and Ravensford take down Drago. I could plead with them and the herbalist for help to solve the curse, add my numbers to theirs if they'd listen. Would they believe it had been 100 years? How could I convince an entire kingdom that their strict beliefs, their entire lifestyle, were not what they thought it was? Could they face the man they thought was their God in battle without switching sides or believing themselves doomed? I swayed, dizzy again. Walking back to the bed I sat on the edge pondering. What was I meant to do?

"Nettle? Are you still here?" Ravensford spoke softly for once, creaking open his door slowly as if he was afraid of what he might find.

"I didn't know you could open a door without slamming it." I rasped, my ravaged throat burning at premature use.

He didn't speak before scooping me up into a hug that was much too enthusiastic for my current condition. Maybe I was a little hasty in thinking I was in any condition to travel, or even believing I knew which direction to travel come to think of it.

"Can't. Breathe." I gasped. He loosened his hold but refused to put me down.

"I am so sorry Nettle, Brenlyn I mean. Or Princess?" He said, tilting his head while adjusting his grip to wrap my legs around his waist. I tried and failed to hold myself up but he didn't mind.

"Not Princess," I state, never having enjoyed the title. "Brenlyn is fine, although Nettle was starting to grow on me." I smiled weakly up at him.

"Good, Nettle it is. I like your name matching your prickles." He said, carrying me to his bed once more.

"I hope you know I'm in no condition for any of the filth that's usually in your mind." I protest as he begins removing my boots and leathers.

"Not to worry, I'm planning on behaving like a perfect gentleman." He said with a wink.

"Another thing I didn't think was possible." I snark back.

"Good thing I'm impossible then." He says, repeating my earlier comment.

"So, Gentleman Ravensford, what are we meant to do the rest of tonight? Today?... You know, I just realized I don't know your first name." I said with a laugh.

"It's been a couple of days since the challenge and when...you passed out. So we're back to Midnight, or Midday by our standards," he chuckled at his joke before continuing, "And to be fair I just learned yours as well. But my first name is Griffin." He said with a wince.

"So you're two times a bird brain. I knew it." I smile again as he squirms.

"It was a family name, and no one is allowed to use it, not even you Nettle." He said nudging my shoulders in jesting annoyance.

"Right, so I'll continue with Captain Feathers for Brains then?" I confirm with my best poker face.

"That's my middle name, actually." He responded equally seriously.

"Sounds like your parents were a big fan of feathers there" I smirked.

"Yeah... about my parents." He said slowly, rubbing his neck.

"What about them?" I asked, wondering where this was going.

"Well, I know you and I didn't have the entire truth for a truth deal like the Mistress but I do still owe you a secret from the other night, and after Mara projected your memories for me and the herbalist... I think it's only fair."

"All of you saw?... everything?" I asked, cringing as he plopped down between me and Roya.

One of her golden eyes slid open and when she saw I was awake she popped up, throwing the book to me before gesturing angrily at the Captain and running through the door.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, as he took the ancient book from my hands, “The herbalist requested to see what he’d done for you to have that much of his magic inside you, and be sure there wasn’t something else she might need to treat. We didn’t know how bad it would be, and I couldn’t leave Mara to bear it alone.” He looked at me with an apology in his eyes and despite my distaste for how it happened, I understood. I wouldn’t have wanted Mara to be alone either. “Mara has given me permission to share some of her story as well, since she doesn’t like talking about it. So after this we’ll be even.” He said it like a question, despite it being a statement.

I gestured for him to continue and he opened the book to the map of Catalencia again. He tapped it and this time the name Avalon appeared. I glanced at the antique book intrigued but weary. What would it show me this time?

“Roya said she told you some of our story?” He prompted.

“Only on the courts organization, the arrival of humans, and the creation of an army that was the fae’s downfall,” I said, trying to remember the particulars of the conversation that already felt so long ago.

“I may repeat some things, but I’m not sure how to tell my story another way, it’s not something I tell often.” He looked at me with strain in his eyes, recognizing the same discomfort and apprehension I felt about telling my own story.

“I’ll try not to interrupt,” I whispered, trying for the same tone Mara had used with me countless times. He clasped one of my hands in his before taking a deep breath and began.

“Our courts were elemental, fire, earth, water, and air,” his finger lingered on the last court, and the smoke spiraled until the images no longer resembled smoke, but felt as real as a memory.

The sky was full of fae with feathered wings with varying patterns diving and dipping around islands suspended in midair. It zoomed in on one fae male, his black feathered wings vanishing just in time for him to grab a vine hanging in the narrow gap between two islands. He let out a whoop of pure joy as he swung through the gap, too narrow for his wings, letting go at the peak of his swing. Rather than letting his wings free he put his arms out to enjoy the free fall, it went on for what might have been minutes. The islands disappeared from view but still he fell. His friends were diving toward him with cries of concern when his wings opened wide, a geyser down below erupting with just enough steam to fill his wings, which launched him away from any danger. The smoke zoomed in on the face to show a much younger Ravensford, who winked at me. The current version reached over to close my jaw before bursting out laughing. I shoved him with my shoulder, embarrassed it had dropped open while still wildly impressed by the physical and mental feat of the drop. The scene continued, showing the tips of finned tails disappearing beneath waves.

“Do you still have wings like the Mistress then?” I asked, marveling at all the smoke had shown me. His laughter faded, and he fiddled with a trinket in his hair. “Ravensford?” I ask, confused by the abrupt change.

“I don’t.” He said solemnly.

“Oh. But you can still fly right? As a bat?” I ask softly, knowing most had the full shift if they weren’t a demi-shifter like Mara.

“No, only turned humans, or lesser fae become bats when turned. Mara and I were high fae, the curse affects us differently.” He said gruffly, dismissing the scene that showed what looked to be a marble skinned fae redirecting lava to build an island, only to show the map again. When he paused as if unsure, I kept all pity from my voice as it was my turn to prompt him.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The human king changed all that crossed his path, forgetting perhaps the competitive nature of the fae. He was soon overpowered by a changed fire fae, Drago. Drago changed tactics in favor of killing almost all the remaining fae, to steal their lands and titles, perhaps hoping to inherit the other courts powers. When it didn’t work, he struck a deal with the remaining human kingdoms. He swore he would not take his undead army, which now included his undead Dragon form to their doorsteps so long as they left him the wood. They agreed on the condition if he would tame the wood and prevent it from encroaching on their boundaries.”

He removed his hand from mine to wipe it nervously on the bed. Not looking at me he skipped to another chapter before continuing.

The book showed the forest twisting in ghostly green flame, darkening into the Dreadwood forest I recognized, though their trunks were pooled with shadows. “He set the entire thing aflame, murdering every remaining druid, sprite, or fae that may have lingered. I was not so closely tied to the trees as Mara, she swears she can still hear their screams.” He gulped, his hands now visibly shaking.

“Our forest was alive once, now it is cursed like us, their spirits turned to shadows and the beings we call dreadlings. Most of them still bound to Drago, the way he bound the rest of the High Fae and his army to him, with his blood.”

“I do not know how long the humans lived in peace, training vampire slayers as a precaution against the king and his undead. I was not allowed out of my cell except to fight or pillage, that is until he sent me to track down and kill Mara. That’s when he took my wings, saying I would not taste flight until I brought her wings to rest in my stead.” He took my hand back in his but did not meet my eye.

“I was just like you when you showed up, Nettle. Determined, furious, and confident of the victory that would return what was most precious to me. She saved me, knew my pain firsthand, promised me vengeance and gave me a purpose that did not require the further sacrifice of my conscience. Then, by the grace of the stars she also became my mate. That was just over 50 years ago.” He smiled then, a bit of light entering his face. I went to speak, and he shook his head. Still not done, he tapped the book once more.

Visions of a Dragon the size of two galley ships began burning entire villages to the ground in the dead of night.

“He was not pleased when he discovered we’d found a way to escape his compulsion, or that we’d begun to free those he sent to pillage the kingdoms no longer protected by the Slayers. He began to rely on his Dragon form, fortunately it weakens quickly away from the wood, and cannot abide the sunlight. We’ve been slowly whittling away his army, while also becoming a haven for survivors. They’ve joined us in trying to protect the remaining kingdoms and find a way to reverse the curse on us and our woods. To say we’re spread thin is a generous understatement.” He shut the book with a loud clap, and I jumped, thoroughly startled.

“So the Slayer’s really did vanish... 100 years ago?” I ask, my throat dry. He poured wine into my goblet and passed it to me, waiting until I’d taken a sip before taking his own. It looked to be full of blood that had no doubt gone cold by the look of distaste on his face.

“They did. No one seems to know how or why, only that they have not answered any call and any sent after them do not return. At least until we saw your memories.” He said after finishing the goblet with a wince.

“Do you know the cure?” I ask, jumping from the bed.

“No, but Mara is there now to see if she can make anything of it. Their numbers would be a welcome relief.”

"She already left?" I shouted, forgetting the sorry state of my throat.

"Yes, she left as soon as she knew you were stable. She was hoping to return before you woke with more news."

"So she wasn't the one to curse us?" I asked, needing to hear it confirmed once and for all.

"No, she was of the fifth court, but the courts power is held in the Wood. The best she can do is wield the spirits of her court that were strong enough to evade Drago, and see her as their rightful queen."

"And Mara agreed to you telling me this?" I ask confused.

"Yes. We were both under Drago's spell too. We saw the signs in you, how it made you distrust your own instincts. The only way to see truly, is with the truth. That's why Mara bound you to the star. She did the same for me." He held up his wrist to show a similar puncture wound. "Whoever you were led to believe Mara is, it's a lie. However it was told to you, by however many people. It's a lie, and perhaps the cruelest he's ever told."

"Why's that? Why would I be the cruelest? I didn't even get close to killing her."

"No, but you're her fated mate, same as me." He said it slowly, like I was a slow child rather than an adult.

"I can't be her mate, I'm human," I say automatically.

"A human with fae blood, as proven by your ability to wake the book with Roya. Quite a bit of it as well from how you smell, and how you train." He said, "not to mention the hair. It's been a while since I've seen that particular shade."

"But how could she know? I don't know. I should know." I say, stammering now.

"So you don't feel a soul-deep need to touch her when she's near? You don't crave her presence? Feel unexplained jealousy around anyone else that gets to feel her? Taste her?" He draws out the last question and the image of him on his knees in front of an empty mirror brings back the flash of jealous rage that I couldn't also see or feel or taste her. That dying to know if I could elicit the same sounds, or louder ones.

"I thought that was her succubus magic," I mutter.

"The only tricks she has as a succubus is to lower inhibitions, or elicit pleasure with her touch, as well as use that pleasure to fill her magic stores."

"I experienced pain when she touched me."

"Those feelings are easily misinterpreted, especially without context. You might have interpreted pain when she was sending extreme pleasure. But there is nothing else. Her magic is now simply fueled with the pleasure she inspires from others, instead of dreams. And her magic is drained from keeping the shadows alive."

"Why can you control them then?"

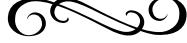
"She taught them to listen to my whistles, they still retain a bit of their sentience. But ultimately they require what remains of her magic to stay on this plane and not fade to the next." he admitted.

"I see," I said, the information whirling around my brain. I was part fae, Mara was my mate and definitely not responsible for the curse, or the cure. Ravensford and I were both her mates. Drago was a high-fae vampire that could turn into a Dragon, and used vampirism to seize more power. Vampirism was a curse made by humans to defeat fae... Mara was my mate.

"So how are we going to defeat this bastard?" I finally asked. Deciding prophecy or not, that was all I wanted besides perhaps the chance to talk to Mara and Ravensford more about this mate business.

"I thought you'd never ask." Ravensford grinned.

Twenty-One



Ravensford was addicted to the written word. Despite acting the soldier, he was a poet at heart through and through. After spending a few hours memorizing Drago's keep we were back to trying to find any mention of the power used or the person responsible for creating vampirism. Anytime I was too rough with turning a page I was reprimanded as if I had torn the wings off a butterfly.

"Nettle, if you don't learn the meaning of the word *gently* in the next hour I swear I will issue you a death match myself." He growled as I tried turning a page that was made of literal dust.

"Good! Take me outside and beat me into the ground but I can't do this anymore. I'm going crazy waiting for her to return." I say looking up to show the redness of my eyes from trying to squint.

"I was only joking. You aren't meant to be moving up and around yet. At least... not violently." He mumbled.

"Well then take me on a walk! Take me into the grounds! I haven't left this castle since I got here and could do with a change of scenery that doesn't include dusty books in a language I can barely read." I whined. I couldn't help it, really. I never stayed indoors if I didn't have to.

"Actually Nettle... that's a great idea. Let's go for a walk." He stood, offering me a hand up before racing away to return with another sack of my newly tailored clothes and freshly oiled leathers and boots. I put them on with his help and waited impatiently as he strapped both our weapons to his back. I only allowed him to rush me through the halls only to save time... and maybe my strength.

As we exited the main building he put me down, allowing me time to take in the sprawling castle that contained several moonlit courtyards, orchards, and crowded gardens. Several bats hung from trees as humans roamed about so I followed Ravensford to the outer wall. The dark pointed towers glinted with the stars as if it was the sky itself that protected this haven of life and greenery. A few guards waved drowsily at Ravensford before lowering the portcullis. I waited until we made it across the winding stone bridge over the moat so as to not be over heard before confirming what I already knew.

"So you really saw my curse?" I asked as we made it to the first of the trees. My shoulders relaxed as I ran my hand along the blackened wood. Perhaps it had not been my successful slaying that had raised my spirits so long ago, but the presence of the trees that my blood called home.

"I saw that he promised Mara's ashes would break it, and that your dreams were the price of you waking. And that everyone looked to be asleep, but I don't quite understand what the curse is." He said, watching me stroke the trunk in a daze.

"Well then, if you don't mind my talking while we walk, I can tell you the story in my own words?" I said, eager to confirm my suspicions and surround myself with the trees.

"We should be fine, there's been no reports of Drago or his ilk recently." he said with a smile.

"My parents had extreme difficulty conceiving. So, in honor of my first name day there was an invitation sent to all the rulers of the mainland and surrounding islands to join us in celebration. It was supposedly a beautiful day... until the dark succubus, the enemy of our church and kingdom appeared. She claimed my parents would rue the day they named a female their heir before cursing me and my kingdom. She said that one day I would cave to the unseemly emotions of womanhood and purge my kingdom into darkness. It was a vague but powerful threat in my people's eyes. The King and Queen, unwilling to send their only heir away hired three Masters to come and train my body, soul, and mind. So that they might prevent this great catastrophe. Not all of his advisors or allies were so convinced. I was seen less of an heir and a more troublesome woman with a kingdom as a consolation prize. I joined the Slayers in my teen years, determined that I would slay the vampire that cursed us so that I might be able to prove my worth.

The King paid for a unit of them to stay permanently while we trained and worked. As we slayed, I learned all the rumors that existed. How Mara was cruel, claiming others' partners out of jealousy and encouraging many to do the same. When I woke to see my entire kingdom asleep, and was offered a bargain from the man I thought was my God, I did not question it. I thought I knew her and hated her. Only after I arrived did I slowly begin to realize it was a lie. I could not understand why she or you would treat me kindly, or what point there was in seeing me as anything other than your enemy. Now that I realize that the majority of what I thought I knew was manipulated by Drago, I can think of nothing other than bringing him to justice. Of slaying the true monster and the curses he has cast.

"Do you believe they are still asleep?" Ravensford asked.

"I do not know. Drago claimed he called up the thorny barrier to deter her and your vampire hoard from descending on them while they slept. It could have been that he's already been there and turned them while I came here to kill her. Before I left, I saw they were all breathing, though if we really have been asleep for 100 years I do not know if they would survive the waking." My nerves dropped at that thought returning and I glanced down a curve in the trail, hoping to see Mara's carriage or her silhouette.

"Thorny barrier?" he asked, glancing at me.

"Yes it covered every wall, and entry, killing some that fell asleep too close to it. They parted for my leaving by Drago's order but otherwise it's really only accessible by air."

"Then Mara would have no trouble getting in. However, I think you'll find Drago exaggerated his power once again in the matter of the vines.

"What do you mean? How else would they have gotten there?" I ask, confused by the idea.

"Come along, I want to show you something," he said, pulling me by the hand.

I followed him deeper into the wood, not arguing when he offered to run us to the spot he had in mind. To my chagrin I was already getting tired, and I wanted to feel more of the night air, it reminded me of freedom, though it felt somewhat empty without the scent of a small star-shaped flower.

As he slowed I saw what he meant. There, overgrown with thorns eerily similar to the castle's was a stone fountain. Every inch sported a different type of stone or gem, and they glittered as if freshly polished despite being abandoned for quite some time.

"This was a fountain built by an earth fae as a mating gift for a druid in Mara's court." He stood back, making no attempt to move the thorns away from the masterpiece.

"Why has no one cleaned it?" I said, moving to brush some of the vines out of the way.

"No one could." He says seriously. In contrast to his words the vines crumbled easily in my hand, it took all of a few seconds to clear it.

“Did anyone try?” I ask just as seriously, only to see him grinning.

“Many, including Drago’s fire, but only a druid can manipulate those vines. Which most likely means you or another in your court were responsible for the thorny barrier of your own castle as well.”

“Did Drago not inherit any druid or earth magic?” I ask.

“No, we think he only inherited the keeper’s magic because it was tied to the land.” He said wincing, as if he felt his mate’s pain even now.

“Why would they do that? Is it not safer to keep your magic inside you?” I asked, unsure how magic really worked.

“It wasn’t really a conscious choice, healing the mind and body as well as manipulating dreams is tricky magic. They require an anchor for their own protection and by using their land they prevented many corrupt fae from misusing the dreams of another to gain power. Though they never expected someone to conquer or curse the entire wood.”

I fiddled with the fountain until I saw what might be a switch, it sparked green under my touch before bubbling to life melodically. The water enhanced the already sparkling stone. “So... perhaps that’s why the Cauldron Keepers called me Daughter of Thorns? Not because of my Kingdom’s name? But my Fae Ancestry?”

“Definitely.” He said with a smile though it quickly turned to a frown as he looked up again.

“What’s wrong? Is it Mara?” I asked cursing my lesser eyesight.

“No it’s not Mara, but I didn’t think we’d sent anyone on patrol tonight.” He muttered. Moments later I heard the squeaking of bats. “Something is off, Come on Nettle, up you get.” He tossed me over his shoulder and made for the Keep. We stopped at the tree line before the moat when the same large roar from my first carriage ride sounded overhead.

Ravensford pushed me backward then, “It’s Drago. Hide.”

He came from the north, circling the keep slowly before letting out another roar. The bats poured out of our keep then, hovering beneath his enormous belly as he continued to circle. Ravensford gripped my hand tightly as Drago roared again, and the bats began flying south in an unnaturally straight line.

The Captain went still as death.

“What is it? What can you see?” I whispered.

The Captain pointed to one of Drago’s feet, and as the bats thinned further, I saw a heart-wrenchingly familiar silhouette in his claws. This time her twisted horns were bowed, her wings hung limp in defeat.

Twenty-Two

I ended up dragging Ravensford back across the moat, only to see most of the humans, while still alive, were drugged into some sort of subservient state. They watched us soullessly from the gardens, halls, and finally the kitchens as we grabbed rations and weapons.

“He most likely plans on sending some of his troops back to collect them when he’s ready.” The Captain said, tears in his eyes despite his monotonous tone. It was like the color and life had drained out of him when he saw Mara clutched in Drago’s claws.

“That’s Giselle, I was there when she was born, and when her daughter was born.” He said, frozen in place again. He touched a dress on the table that was in the middle of being mended.

“Captain, compartmentalize. We need a plan.” The Herbalist and Cauldron Keepers were nowhere to be found, but I found conveniently packaged vials laid out for us, as if she knew what we’d need. I threw them in the pack before turning to see Ravensford stuff the dress into his own, I would have questioned it but I saw a bit of his color returning. If it was his lucky dress, then who was I to argue?

“How far away is it by horse? Do we have time to get there before the sun rises?” I look to see him packing a bag of potatoes now, a grin back on his face.

“You are freaking me out.” I admit slowly.

“Just trust me. Grab a bag of sewing needles and thread, and then hand me that empty potato sack. We’re not going by horse. I have a better idea.” He said, grabbing the sack from my hands before disappearing.

Turns out his better idea involved strapping seemingly random items and enough firewood for a week to a donkey before leading us down a dark tunnel without answering any questions.

“Where did this tunnel come from? And where does it go?” I asked for the tenth time, this time trying to pull down my sword from his back. He shook me off before looking down at me, finally coming out of whatever planning stupor he’d entered.

“We’ve dug a few tunnels over the decades to make travel easier. This one goes under the walls of Drago’s fortress.” He said.

“Are you going to tell me the plan now or am I meant to be cooked with potatoes as a sacrifice for Mara? Because while I respect that idea, I really have a hard time with surprises.”

“If you get captured, you don’t have Drago’s powers to help keep what I need to do secret. So, let’s just focus on getting into the fortress and go from there.” He said, stroking the bag of potatoes like they were actually jewels.

We walked in silence for hours before he pulled me down and demanded we sleep. Despite the hard ground my body shut down immediately. I awoke to something rough being shoved over my head. Panicking I ripped it off, confident this was a sign he was selling me out, only to see it was the old

dress.

"Excuse me Captain Crazy but that's not how you wake people up in enemy territory, I was about to kill you. Now why are you giving me your lucky dress?" I ask holding it up to see it was barely passable as my size.

He stared at me blankly, "How do you expect to blend in dressed like a warrior?"

"I didn't know I was meant to be blending in. Remember?" I started untying the leathers. My body aching from the activity and hard floor. As I got mostly undressed a handful of dirt hit my chest.

"You look too clean too, rub that in. Everywhere." He said, sitting down as if to watch a show. "Don't forget behind the ears!"

"This is disgusting, and if there isn't a purpose for it later, I will be killing you myself." I mutter, rubbing the dirt into my skin and hair. Careful of the thorns there.

"Those are gonna have to come out." He said looking closer at my braid. "What do you remember of the map we looked at?"

"Almost nothing," I admit as I begin to unravel the braid I'd just been reunited with.

"Excellent. You'll be entering from the Kitchens. With some food from the Root Cellar this tunnel ends at." He said as he held out a sack for me to drop the silver into.

"And you'll be... doing something else?" I say, looking at the odd assortment of vegetables, mending, and cooking accessories.

"Yes, definitely."

"Okay, so how am I supposed to find you or Mara or get back out again?"

"I'll be sending a signal. Just be ready to run when it happens. But first... do you mind if I have a drink? I'm terribly parched and your lack of vampire bites might give you away."

"Yes, fine, but can you at least tell me where to run?" I ask again, annoyed by the rising libido that followed his bite. One that would be getting no satisfaction, despite having few layers to disguise my arousal.

"Follow your gut, you'll see. Just don't have too much fun." He said, wagging his fingers at me after wiping the blood from his face.

"You're impossible."

"And that's why this is going to work." He said with a smile.

I was told to leave my pack and weapons with him, which I only agreed to after swiping a few things for my own plan. I trusted he wanted Mara free enough to go along with this chaos, but I wasn't going to go into Drago's fortress without some sort of backup. I swung the bag of potatoes onto my back and ascended the cellar steps, just another filthy blood slave, adopting the fate I'd expected from Mara in order to save her.

The crash of waves told me the ocean was close, though my eyes could barely make out the towering fortress ahead of me. We were in a walled courtyard that extended in a circle behind me only to disappear into darkness. The wall itself was massive and was interrupted by wide watchtowers. As impressive as the wall was, it paled to the height and width of the building in front of me. It looked to be made of tall towers stacked next to each other, the long flat walls bearing tattered banners stamped with a dragon, the colors long since bleached by the salty air. In a word this place was impenetrable.

I made the long walk to the castle, ignoring the sinking feeling that arose as the castle swallowed the sky. I guessed the nearest door would be the kitchens, and to my relief it was. The girl closest to the door took the potatoes from me with a glazed look before handing me a goblet which I pretended to sip. She then gave me a tray of the goblets before pushing me out of the kitchens and into a dimly lit

and crowded hall. It smelled of old blood and spilled wine, and I tried not to think too long on why. I took a moment to rearrange my skirts and subtly rearrange the tray before I wandered the hall slowly. I swayed to match the gait of the drugged girls and vampires until all the Goblets were taken. At that point I began to wander away from the hall, unsure of what to do. Was I meant to follow my gut now as well or only later? Maybe I'd be drawn to my mate? It seemed like it might be worth a shot. I took the first stairwell on the left, wincing at the narrow space and went down. Maybe it would lead to a dungeon? Dead end. Maybe my instincts were still shit then.

I went back up and walked through the crowded hall, this time following where the other girls with trays went. We were in a hall that led up some wider flagstone steps made of stone. When we reached the next level we passed several large doors. All of which had empty goblets the others were fetching. I began to do the same, pausing outside of one that smelled strongly of Jasmine. I looked around to see if anyone was watching before checking the lock. There was none. I entered quickly to see an opulent room of red and gold, complete with Mara kneeling on the bed dressed in a gauzy, red dress that covered less than her lacy or shadow underthings ever did.

As soon as I entered the room her gaze narrowed in on me. Her eyes were glazed, but as she took in a deep breath, they turned red with hunger. She pounced, sinking her fangs into my neck while she held me against the door. If I closed my eyes I could almost pretend that neither of us were in danger of dying, that we were back at home, her venom inspiring all the things I wanted to do to her. All the things I was too afraid to try before. She hummed against my neck, her nose drawing a line up to the sensitive shell of my ear before she whispered, "Mine."

I looked at her then and saw the Gold of her eyes once more, though they were still hazy. Her hands began to feel around the dress until she heard a crinkle in the seam. I looked down at her confused but she wasted no time ripping the seam open with her teeth. The dress now had a slit that came up to mid-thigh. She stroked the skin of my thigh before taking the hidden pouch of herbs and shoving them in her mouth. I'd never seen her eat or drink anything but blood but she continued chewing rapidly before swallowing with a gag. Her eyes stayed cloudy, but she grabbed me and threw me on the bed before I could ask what they were.

"I could kill you for putting yourself in danger like this Nettle."

"I could say the same about you, Nightmare." I breathe.

"Nightmare? The Captain said you had a gift for nicknames. What was his? He wouldn't tell me."

"Nestling," I say with a blush as her hand trace the slit over and over again. I should be worried about figuring out the plan, but it seems she and The Captain already know it, and I'd done my part, so perhaps I was meant to follow my instincts with her. And... at the moment it was just nice to let them have control.

"Nettle, Nightmare, and Nestling. Perfect." She said, tapping her fingers against my lips. I opened up as I'd once seen The Captain do and was not disappointed when she slid them in. "Suck, I need them nice and wet." I didn't feel the need to correct her despite feeling more than ready for her. I sucked and licked, even going so far as to ease my head down as far as I could on her fingers.

"Are you Nettle right now? Or my pet?" The words had me feeling light-headed as I gagged again on her fingers before she withdrew them. I waited with bated breath as they disappeared beneath the dress only to be caught off guard as her other hand rose to pinch my nipple instead. I gasped and arched, trying to find her other hand.

"Answer the question, Nettle? Pet? Or do you prefer Slut?" Her pinch tightened until I moaned out.

"Pet, Slut, Nettle, I don't care so long as I'm yours." The thrill of surrendering to her heightened

by her fingers circling the apex of my thighs.

"Such a good pet, coming to get your mistress. How should I reward such loyalty?" She said, leaning forward to bite my other nipple, rolling it gently between her teeth.

"However you want Mistress," I say, honestly unsure of what else to say. My words were gone now, all that was left was the feeling of her.

"Already so well trained. Very well, how about we continue the game we played last time?" She flipped up my gown to bare me to her, taking a moment to admire the way my legs were trembling already before kneeling on the bed again, this time she climbed over me so her knees were on either side of my face while her arms were on either side of my waist. "Whatever I do to you, you're going to do to me. Do you understand? You do not stop until I stop."

"Yes, Mistress." I heaved, grateful to know I would be doing exactly what she wanted, the threat of error banished with one command. I was giddy from relief.

She wasted no time, diving forward to continue circling the same spot as before. I moved her transparent dress out of the way before grabbing her waist to lower her onto my mouth, finding and circling the same spot through a bit of trial and error. Her sounds encouraged the process and gave me even more of a thrill than I'd expected. Turning off my brain completely I thought only of pleasure, of her mouth on me and my mouth on her. As I got close to the edge I tapped her leg, unsure of whether that was what she wanted. She rearranged herself and I saw her shadows were back, and had already taken the form of a harness.

"Wait, Mistress. Please." I gasp, unsure of how my request will be received.

She froze immediately, listening.

"I don't want the shadows tonight. Just you." I admit, blushing at the admission.

"Then you'll have me. Always." The shadows slunk off of her legs to wrap around my own. They spread me, immobilizing me for her. She settled between my legs without making contact with my heated skin. Instead she let her attention settle on me, a different kind of touch. One that had my insecurities rising to the surface.

"Do you like what you see?" I joke, my voice cracking with nerves.

"I love what I see." She whispered tenderly, she bent down to kiss my thumb and I allowed the tears to well over as it didn't burn. She loved what she saw, she wanted to keep me. And I realized I felt the same. I wanted to keep her, all of her.

Her kisses had made it to my shoulder and I was already straining against the shadows in an attempt to wrap my legs around her, feel her everywhere. She began worshipping my chest and I went to grip her hair only to find my hands bound as well. I whimpered my disappointment only to be rewarded by the arousing sensation of her chuckling into my chest. Deciding my last request had turned out well I took a deep breath to make another.

"Bite me, please Mistress. Make me yours." The shadows disappeared as her fangs dug in to my neck. I arched into her at last. The pleasure of her venom and the pressure of her body against mine was enough to make my head swim. As her fangs disappeared from my neck, I felt the familiar silk of her fingers slip inside me. She leaned forward and stole my lips in a bloody kiss. I grabbed the locks of her hair, finally allowing myself to pull her closer, biting her lip hard enough I tasted her blood mingle with my own. I swallowed before breaking the kiss to whisper in her ear.

"How would I accept you as my Mate?" I ask, stumbling over the last word in my own nervousness. She paused, withdrawing with a wary look in her eyes.

"I would not have you accept a lasting bond out of fear," she spoke slowly, but stayed hovering above me.

“Do you not want me, since you already have Ravensford?” I ask, my voice cracking as I voiced my fear.

“Nonsense, I told you before, I am loath to choose. The stars always provide more than one for a reason. To give us choice, to bond with many, one, or no mate. It is simply to show our magic as compatible, a necessary thing with the difficulty we have in conception.” Mara spoke softly, it was only because I knew her that I recognized her rambling as nervousness.

“Then tell me how. I wish to be yours. To claim you as mine, for as long as I live. Truly.” My voice cracked, the fear of her loss hitting me fully at last. I stroked her arms and back as if to convince myself she was truly here, in my arms.

“It’s similar to the truth oath. We need only say we claim the other and any other promises we might wish to make, all sworn under a star of our choice while mixing blood.” We smiled sheepishly at each other, our blood still staining the others lips.

“I do not know your stars by name, so by all the stars in the sky, I claim you Mara. And I swear I’ll stand by your side till the end.” Tears sprung to her eyes as her recent bite mark beneath my collar glowed.

“By all the stars in the sky, I claim you Brenlyn. And I swear I’ll do everything in my power to make your place at my side one of joy, pleasure, and vengeance.” The bite beneath her lip began to glow as well. As we came together in another bloody kiss, I felt her fingers slip inside me once more. Claiming me with every curl and thrust, her touch was just as powerful as her venom until my release came barreling through me. She removed her fingers only to slide them between my cheeks.

“Tonight I’m going to come, riding on your pretty face. But tomorrow, after Drago is defeated. I’m going to come, claiming this hole instead.” Her eyes flashed with that promise. All while more shadows gathered around her.

“Yes, Mistress.” I gasped as her fingers pressed against the taboo spot.

“Good, Now lay all the way down.” Her shadows wrapped around each of my limbs, stretching them until I was fully spread eagle once more. She crawled up me slowly, kissing every dirty inch of me. She took advantage of the dress’s loose fit to slide the neckline low enough to bring me back to the edge from nipple stimulation alone. It wasn’t until I was begging that she finally mounted my face.

“Shake your head side to side if you need to breathe... or bite me again. I’m partial to either.” She said before rocking herself across my ready and willing tongue. She worked herself in circles taking breaks to praise and admire her handiwork. When she finally came I was lightheaded, but warm from praise and pleasure.

“You did so well.” She told me again. Her shadows vanished to leave us alone.

“I did?” I ask with wonder.

“Yes, between the blood and pleasure I’m more than topped off, but the mating bond has me buzzing. Now all we have to do is wait.” I knew exactly what she meant. My whole body tingled as she led me to her bathing chamber, we both took turns using the lavatory before she directed me toward a clear chamber with a lever. As she pulled the lever it began to rain.

“What is this?” I ask in wonder. Pulling back when the water was boiling hot.

“It’s called a shower, I forget how much you missed in the last 100 years,” she said, stripping us both before pulling me in behind her. There she began murmuring praise as she brought me to ruin once more before cleaning me thoroughly. I leaned against her strong and soft frame, grateful as she massaged the sore muscles I’d collected over the last few days.

She then took me to her wardrobe, putting on a purple gown before dressing me back in the servants dress, though the shadows had sewn up the slit and any other issues. When I put it back on, I

found the entire thing was lined in the silk of her shadows. Something she couldn't do to her own gown without drawing attention.

"So what now?" I ask.

My answer came in the form of an earsplitting explosion shaking the building, Ravensford's signal.

"Now we move." She said, like she'd had everything timed to the last second, grabbing my hand and towing me into the smoke-filled hallway.

Twenty-Three

Whatever drugs or hypnotism might have gripped the castle's minds had loosened its grip in the threat of fire. Everyone was running in random directions, save for a handful of both vampires and humans who were vomiting black bile. I felt a twinge of guilt at that, if I had known the signal would put these possibly innocent at risk I wouldn't have incapacitated them. Before I could get too upset about it I saw a handful of vampires wearing masks had spotted us across the crowded chaos. Mara swept me in her arms before beelining up the staircase I'd taken earlier. With each turn I felt my skin tighten from the increasing heat. Before the last turn she set me down to weave a door of shadows.

Our pursuer's muffled shouts followed us into a balmy room bathed in flame. Torches were set every few feet along the wall in addition to three ornate chandeliers. Their blaze animated the occupied throne of gold flame.

As he sat immersed in the flickering metal I had the strangest moment where I forgot Drago and the Sun God were the same. He greeted me with open arms, his smile reflecting what I previously might have believed to be the flames of the sun. I felt an undeniable nostalgia, as if to say I was safe and he was my home. The comfort of the familiar was an all too tempting trap, but I knew now that's what it was. I touched the mark on my neck as he beckoned us closer, never leaving his throne.

"Brenlyn, what a pleasant surprise. Have you come to beg forgiveness? I see my suspicions were correct. You've gone quite astray." He looked disdainfully at Mara, who bore her fangs in a hiss.

"I'll not be begging forgiveness. Although you can feel free to begin at any time." I said, stopping short of his outstretched arms.

"Brenlyn, I am your God. You've made oaths to me, promises that can't be broken." His arms dropped as his voice turned severe, a threat.

"You are no God of mine, and I will not be held to an oath based on deceit."

"What deceit? I meant every word." He lied smoothly still unaware of the star's power.

"Do you even notice when you lie anymore? Or do your own words become your reality as soon as you say them?" I spit.

"What do you plan to do then? Run away? Leave your family to rot? You can't kill me, you lack the power. Worship me again, drink from my cup and I will forgive this misadventure. We all make mistakes, but I swear to claim you once more." His face was calm, as he gestured to a large goblet at his feet.

"I am no pawn to be traded between Gods. I am power itself. I will not be wielded by you again and should I have to spill rivers of ash and blood to get my wishes, I will." I said, letting my hand fall from my neck to show the mating mark.

"You would truly turn your back on me and your people for a pair of golden eyes?" He raged, looking between me and Mara with enough emotion for his mask to slip. I could see clearly the reptilian slit in his blue depths, see the cold truth of his heartless husk.

"You have blinded any that looked upon you and called it a gift. But I see it now for what it truly is. A veil of deceit that benefits few beyond yourself. I cannot and will not allow myself to be detached from my own power. My own destiny. And if that scares or angers you then perhaps you were never much of a benevolent God to begin with." I state coolly, feeling a stirring in my chest as I looked at Mara. She had stood to the side, allowing me my moment without interference.

"You will pay for this disobedience, you and your kingdom." He swore to me, looking between Mara and I once again, as if he couldn't decide which of us angered him more.

I felt that tug in my chest again, and this time looked down to see the spirals of thorns circling his feet. I ducked behind Mara, as if now my speech was done I was too timid to advance, all the while encouraging them to circle him in his throne.

"I've waited too long to avenge my fallen, Deceiver. Make your move Dragon, and then we will see... who is immortal and who is alive." Mara challenged. All the while I was thickening my vines, imbuing them with my will.

He made to shift and I screamed, forcing my vines to clamp onto his legs and grow. Grow and tear and keep him still. Trapped and suffering as he had kept me and my people.

"Fitting a druid should be your fall, Fae-killer," Mara spoke, glancing at me with pride before calling the shadows from beneath my dress to form a spear. She aimed it at his eye before asking, "Any last words?"

"Yes actually. You think you want my death more than anything, but you're wrong. I have what you truly desire."

"There's nothing I want more."

"Not even your fae court?"

She lowered her spear. "That's impossible. I watched you burn them to ash."

"No Mara, you have suffered in vain for all these years. You're no more the last fae than I'm the last dragon." She looked down at her thumb and back at me in shock.

"What do you mean?" She whispered.

"You'll never know if you kill me."

Ravensford crashed through one of the tall windows then, "Oh good, you haven't killed him yet." He said, wiping the blood off of his arms while he shook the glass off of his glorious night black wings. His skin glowed The shaking quickly dislodged a blob of darkness that rolled straight for Mara. The smoke was thinning around him and I smelled the faintest trace of the same herbs Mara had taken from my dress.

"Perfect timing, as always," Mara said with a kiss.

Ravensford breathed her in deeply before looking between Mara's lip and my neck as if he could smell our bond. "Looks like I missed out on all the fun, I expect a full reenactment when we finish here." He declared with enough confidence it felt less like a possibility and more like reality.

Roya unfurled into her full form to roll her eyes at Ravensford when Mara gave a silent command. Determined steps brought Roya to Drago quickly, though when she tried to enter his mind a green flash from my vines stopped her.

She looked at me in surprise before offering her hand again. Fearless I shortened the gap between us before joining our hands.

"Can you tell the vines to let me pass? Or ask them to recede?" The familiar bells asked.

“I don’t know how, can you show me?”

“They no longer recognize me.”

I looked at Mara, her eyes were full of unbridled hope. *She says she can still hear their screams*, Ravensford had said. She’d been suffering for long enough, if these memories could restore even a part of what she’d lost then it would be worth the risk. I asked the thorn covered walls of my mind to come down.

Roya looked at me with surprise as I sent my first thought down our connected hands. “Can you enter my mind and use my magic through me?”

She nodded, pulling us closer until our foreheads touched.

Roya’s form hesitated at the threshold of my mind, and I beckoned her forward. As her foot crossed the threshold the shadows melted into a fair-skinned fae dressed in a short dress of flared maple leaves. Her eyes met mine and rather than gold I found a riot of orange, yellow, and red. She stretched out her limbs, twirling and releasing her twinkling laugh. Green sparks came from the corners of my mind to swirl around her like friendly fireflies.

“You have the powers of a summer druid,” she said touching one of the green sparks, *“just like my sister did,”* it glowed red to match her autumnal garb. She stepped back over the threshold and it returned to green. *I can only control the vines from your mind, you were right, your control on them is too new, most likely strengthened by the mating bond. Don’t ask them to recede, or they will crumble completely.*

“What should I do then? Can you enter Drago’s mind from here?”

“I can but there is great risk in entering a hostile mind and you will need to leave yours open to me or I will be lost there.”

“I want to do this for her, for Ravensford, and the dreadlings. Please. You took the chance to trust me, let me return the favor and trust you.”

“If there was any other way I would deny you, but your magic is strong. If anything goes wrong ask it to protect you,” she warned.

I nodded and she placed her small hands on the floor of my mind. I saw my vines retreating on Drago before her dreadling self placed her other hand on Drago’s mind. Her form slowly disappeared into Drago’s mind, turning his eyes dark as pitch. A small thread of shadow was gripped tightly in my hand, the only sign she’d entered from my mind rather than hers.

“Find the others Roya, show me what he’s hiding.”

Mara shifted her shadows into a screen behind me but if I closed my eyes I could see the images more clearly. We were ducking under what looked to be a fallen beam, his mind crafted like a dilapidated prison. It was only Roya’s nimble maneuvering of a mind dripped in corruption and greed that kept us from what was sure to be a series of traps.

“Wait Roya! There!” Mara called, pointing down a corridor veiled in shadow.

A memory glowed behind the open cell, *scattered letters penned by four different hands, each detailing the movements of the different houses of Fae, all alive but scattered.* Roya moved on in search of more.

“Be careful Roya, don’t go too deep.” Mara cautioned.

We paid no mind, opening the next memory cell where he flew to their new locations. *There in the north were the missing floating islands of the air fae, populated by fire and air alike. To the west in the endless ocean, the water fae had populated both the islands and the depths. And finally, the earth fae, in the sheer cliffs of a volcanic archipelago to the east.*

“That’s enough Roya, it’s time to stop,” Mara commanded. A river of shadows split the floor, but

across the bank, from the next cell I heard the booming laugh of Master Jericho.

I stepped forward unconsciously, only for Roya to jerk me back from the river's clifflike edge. Shadows followed, straining to wrap around my foot.

"You need to go back, you shouldn't be here."

"That's my kingdom Roya, I know it. I have to see what it says, maybe it has the cure to their curse."

"Go back the way we came and I'll do what I can."

I followed her instructions, quickly fleeing the darkness of his mind to open my own eyes and take a step back to view Mara's screen of shadow. I clenched my fist twice to let her know I was safe.

She hesitated before backing up, taking a running leap before opening the memory of my people, still asleep.

There hidden in that memory. It showed his plans to punish Mara by convincing the humans to turn on her, only to discover a baby that smelled faintly of Jasmine. What a better way to punish her than to see her mate cursed by her own power. If anything might make her hesitate, join him, it was that.

He wasn't expecting Mara to escape before he could use the bait, not wanting her to have time to break the curse he kept it secret, tying the curse to the land to save his strength, after all it had worked before. But perhaps the land could only power so much, because a pitiful human woke of her own accord. So he needed to improvise. Perhaps she would be the only person with enough hate to kill Mara.

Roya pounced on the mention of his previous use of the land to anchor a curse.

Inspired by the fifth court, he had brewed something with the help of his bonded.

There, several centuries ago was a faceless human king. One pleading for Drago's help to repulse the Wood that continued to devour his property.

"You're a fire fae, just burn it down. Enough to keep it from advancing at least."

"I cannot, I am bound by the treaty, but... there is another way." We all watched in horror as four cloaked fae convinced the king to agree to a bargain that would make him and his people unbeatable. Stronger than the fae. And as they all put a drop of their blood on his lips his eyes turned red.

Roya backed up to the edge of the hallway to jump back over the river. As she began to run I clenched the thread tighter in concern, she needed to make it. She needed to teach me about my magic, and all the druid stories. The breath knocked out of me as she fell on her chest on the following bank. She scrambled up the edge, only to show a tendril of shadow wrapped around her leg, pulling her in. Mara went to reach a hand in, to pull her out but she shook her head. Her dreading form returned as the shadows melded with her. The string in my hand snapped and she jumped willingly into the river, sinking into the darkness.

"Roya!" Mara screamed.

Where she had fallen, the river began to bubble. We leaned forward as one, wondering if she could survive whatever the waters held. A blast of red light carried one final hidden memory from the depths.

*Gather all four deceivers
beneath The Dreadwood's limbs.*

*When roots are drenched in vengeance,
the cursed will freely live.*

The red light faded into a flutter of maple leaves, followed by the faintest whisper from Roya.
"Save our family, and live."

I clutched the bit of thread left in my grasp, but it was no use. She was gone.

Ravensford draped his arms around Mara as she dismissed her shadows with a sob.

Roya had saved us. Had she not fallen to find that memory we would have taken our vengeance and been damned, spilling Drago's blood too soon only to lock the curses in place. And the cure? It would be the same for us all. Vampirism, the wood, and my kingdom... and I would never have the chance to thank her. Never have the chance to ask if she knew the druid I'd descended from. I looked at the Villain we could not yet kill, his eyes once more the startling cold blue and I wondered how we could keep him from escaping long enough to find the others.

My thoughts were interrupted by the murmuring of a crowd behind us. I dropped into a fighting stance only for them to look at Mara with clear gazes and bow. She let her horns and wings unfurl behind her.

I looked at Ravensford in shock to which he whispered, "Potatoes injected with blackthorn for the humans, Dreadwood fire with herbs for the vampires to muddle his blood's effects until more blackthorn could be brewed."

Mara wiped the remaining tears from her face before summoning a crown of star speckled shadow. Her fae magic was returned with the defeat of the usurper.

"We have a long road ahead of us, but I swear by the crown of the Keepers of Avalon, I will not rest until justice is done. The Wood, the humans, and the fae must be restored."

The crowd rose and cheered. Most of them looked at Drago with pure loathing.

"Looks like you'll have time to beg for forgiveness after all." I smile, letting my vines pull tighter.
"Who should we start with first?"

Also by Alora Black

Want more of Nettle, Mistress Mara, and Captain Feathers-for-Brains?

Subscribe to my mailing list [here](#) for the Epilogue and Updates on upcoming books in this series (name TBA).

Want to talk to others about this world? Join my Facebook group [here](#). These characters became larger than I ever imagined and I just couldn't do their story justice in one book so... I guess I just have to write more!

For those of you that can't wait for more of my writing, I have good news! I'm also coauthoring a book called [The Holy Academy of Witches](#) with Freya Grey. It is an NA paranormal/fantasy romance (MF/MF) currently set to release on November, 11th (see what we did there?).

About The Holy Academy of Witches:

Adeline and Sage, two teenage witches, find themselves on the same side of a rising conflict in the dark halls of The Holy Academy of Witches. In a place where knowledge is power and secrets are currency, can they overcome their own demons when trust is a luxury not even old money can buy?

Acknowledgments

Holy shit, is this real life? Wow! Just... wow. If I had known how invested, I would become in my silly vampire novella when Ophelia first proposed the Bound by Blood series to me... I still would have done it because I'm a masochist. Thankfully I have amassed a masochist support group, without which I never would have had the confidence to publish this little piece of my crooked heart.

First, I have to thank my hubby, who has sacrificed sleep and sanity to help make this and my every dream a reality. Like Mara and Ravensford you are my Light in the Night, and my joy. I'll never stop being grateful for your unwavering faith in me. You saw my passion and ambitions before I did, and helped me to never be afraid of my own power.

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Next, I need to thank my Bookish Besties and Betas. Specifically Ashlee and Lucia for not giving up on me and pumping me up when I thought my book might be actual shite. But also to the queenly chaos of Hayley, Mackenzie, Miranda, and Vanes Darling who made me feel like an actual rockstar with their enthusiasm for my stories.

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About Alora Black

[Alora Black](#) writes paranormal/fantasy romance. Her writing juxtaposes dark themes with humor and spice. She loves bringing fantasy under her bisexual lens where every one is fair game for love and war.

If you share a love for magic, mystery, and mayhem then check out her book aesthetics on TikTok (@alorablackauthor). There you'll get a taste of her three worlds. [The Holy Academy of Witches](#), a paranormal dark romance; [The Nettle and the Nightmare](#), a queer why choose vampire Sleeping beauty retelling novella; and, finally, her Kindle Vella series, [The Shifting Thorns](#), a queer why choose beauty and the beast retelling.

